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“A MIGHTY WOMAN WITH A TORCH”:
DOROTHY THOMPSON’S CALL FOR AMERICAN ACTION
AGAINST NAZISM AND JEWISH PERSECUTION, 1931-1945

A Thesis Presented

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ABSTRACT

During the interwar period in the United States, the looming threat of Nazi Germany and the persecution of Jews was not at the forefront of American minds. However, one prominent journalist and activist, Dorothy Thompson, made it her life's mission to turn complacency into action. This research explores the American response to Nazism, the refugee crisis, and the Holocaust from the biographical perspective of this American woman who, significantly, was the first foreign journalist expelled from Nazi Germany. Combining American, German, and women's history, this thesis tells the story of Thompson's underappreciated role in American journalism and politics as well as her relentless personal and public actions to condemn Hitler's regime and aid Jewish refugees. Examining this period through the life of a prominent individual and her far-reaching network expands on the existing historical research about the American response during the 1930s and 1940s, arguing that not all Americans were, or had to be, complacent onlookers. In particular, the American press has been scrutinized for its reporting, or lack of reporting, on Nazism and the "Jewish Question." Likewise, the Roosevelt administration's strict stance on refugees and "inadequate" foreign intervention has also been disputed. By using archival sources such as letters, diaries, books, newspapers, speeches, and manuscripts, this thesis argues that Thompson, who was tuned into these pressing issues already at the beginning of the Third Reich, consistently offered three impressive contributions to push against apathy throughout the 1930s and 1940s: educating the American masses about Nazism and its threat; warning of the specific Jewish plight; and demonstrating and initiating political and humanitarian activism as Nazi policy and American policy evolved. This research showcases the persistent and courageous efforts of an influential woman who waged her own war on Nazism and successfully fought for Jewish refugees in a variety of ways. Her story highlights and challenges the American bystander narrative, expanding the historical analysis of the American and transnational response to Nazism and Jewish persecution by examining avenues of resistance that were up against forceful forms of indifference, even reluctance, from varying segments of society.

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University of Vermont. In addition to offering me a Graduate Assistantship during my studies, the Center provided generous funding to travel to Washington DC and conduct research at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress in Spring 2020 – a trip that unearthed some of the most exciting and previously unknown sources that appear in this thesis. Finally, I am deeply appreciative of the assistance that I have received at all the libraries and archives that I have visited.

Lastly, and most importantly, I would like to thank my loved ones for putting up with my insatiable desire to pursue this research. They know better than anyone how much effort has been made. In particular, I am thankful to Frank Lyon for always serving as my research trip assistant (and not complaining once) and for his boundless enthusiasm about Thompson's exceptional story.

It is my hope that this thesis starts to give Dorothy Thompson a proper place in historical memory. As I think she would have wanted, I do not dedicate this work to her outstanding life, but to the millions of human beings who, at the hands of the Nazis and by the failure of bystanders, lost theirs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	II
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: DOROTHY THOMPSON’S BEGINNINGS, PRE-1931	20
CHAPTER 2: RISE TO PROMINENCE: BETWEEN GERMANY AND AMERICA, 1932-1934.....	44
CHAPTER 3: A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING AND THE FORMATION OF A “PERSONAL BRAIN TRUST,” 1935-1937	65
CHAPTER 4: AVENUES OF ACTIVISM AND THE CRISIS OF 1938: THE EVIAN CONFERENCE	90
CHAPTER 5: AVENUES OF ACTIVISM AND THE CRISIS OF 1938: KRISTALLNACHT AND PERSONAL AID	131
CHAPTER 6: FIGHTING THE “GERMAN INFERNO” ABROAD AND AT HOME, 1939-1941	159
CHAPTER 7: ACTIONS DURING THE HOLOCAUST AND RELATIONSHIP WITH ZIONISM, 1942-POST-WAR.....	210
CONCLUSION.....	229
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	248

INTRODUCTION

The New Colossus By Emma Lazarus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”¹

This well-known poem was written in 1883 by a Jewish immigrant and later engraved on the Statue of Liberty to show the ideological promise of an American life. About forty years later, a real woman named Dorothy Thompson paralleled this emblematic mighty woman with a torch, illuminating the dangers of Hitler’s fascist rule and acting as a “Mother of Exiles” for Jewish refugees attempting to flee Nazi Germany. In the 1930s and 1940s she stood resolute as the most prominent American journalist and activist who felt a sincere moral obligation to amplify and preserve American ideals by championing a democratic and humanitarian response to the Nazi program. While other

¹ Poetry Foundation, “The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus,” text/html, Poetry Foundation, 1883, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus>.

reporters and American leaders were focused on domestic politics, failed to grasp the nuances of Nazi ideology, or did not think that it was their place to be an opinionated activist, Thompson believed in a universalist democratic future that rivaled the nationalist authoritarian system of fascism. She became a distinctive voice on European and global issues, transmitting knowledge about the problems of Nazism and, importantly, the reality of Jewish persecution, to spectators within the United States. She worked tirelessly to shed light on Nazism as the antithesis of American democracy and warned of the distinct problems Jews faced within the ideological and practical world of the Third Reich.

Although an obvious outlier as a determined spokesperson and activist against Nazi ideology and terror, Thompson became well respected and widely followed among the American masses – at her height she reached more than 10 million people every day. To engage with this many Americans on a daily basis Thompson’s impressive platform included a syndicated column appearing across the country, first with *the New York Herald Tribune* and later with the *New York Post*, a significant radio presence through the National Broadcasting Company and the Columbia Broadcasting System, regular lecture tours, frequent articles published in journals such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Harper’s Magazine*, and the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and eight full-length broadly circulated books. The common thread running throughout these outlets was Thompson’s sharp political analysis, condemnation of Nazism and its treatment of Jews, and an insistence that American involvement in Europe was necessary for the preservation of democracy, equality, and freedom. While these issues were not readily at the forefront of many American minds, Thompson’s high

profile status as a celebrity journalist and commentator forced them into everyday discussion.²

In her commentary Thompson typically appealed to the moral aspects of Christianity, the historic context of America functioning as a refuge, and an internationalist democratic vision for the future as the key motivators for Americans to fight Nazism and aid Jewish refugees. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, she not only wrote and spoke about these matters, but practiced what she preached by becoming a leading humanitarian and political activist, using her own abilities and extensive network to create campaigns of action. In a time when the press produced confused interpretations about the danger within Nazi Germany and the United States was plagued with antisemitism and widespread isolationist sentiment, Dorothy Thompson stood as a beacon of liberty, imploring American politicians and citizens to follow her lead and take action against menacing persecution.

On January 20, 1939 an admirer wrote to Thompson expressing gratitude for her activism, “When the history of these times is written with the perspective of distance, your leadership in the fight for the persecuted minorities...will be given its proper place.”³ Despite her outspoken, prescient, and insistent words and actions during the Nazi years, history has not yet done Dorothy Thompson justice. Often, one can recognize her second husband, Sinclair Lewis, more readily than she. Ironically, during the height of both their

² Catherine L. Covert and John D. Stevens, eds., *Mass Media between the Wars: Perceptions of Cultural Tension, 1918-1941* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 127.

³ Letter from unknown name, 20 January 1939, Scrapbook 32: Letterbook 24 Jan 1939 - Dorothy Thompson honorary dinner, Oversized Material, Dorothy Thompson Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries [Hereafter DT Papers].

fame, Dorothy Thompson was the one who received superior public attention. According to a *Time* magazine cover story in June 1939, Thompson was the second most famous and influential woman in the United States, second only to Eleanor Roosevelt, with whom she was personally associated.⁴ Like Eleanor Roosevelt, Dorothy Thompson was a humanist concerned with the many social issues that plagued her time. Thompson was an adamant first-wave feminist and active suffragist, an ally to the African American community, an advocate for American youth and education, and in her later years she became a vocal critic of Israel's treatment of Palestinian Arabs. However, unlike Eleanor Roosevelt, because she was not a political figure, Thompson was not restricted in her ability to act on her moral conscience, allowing her to lead many divisive initiatives without hesitation.⁵

Thompson waged a zealot-like mission against Nazism, deeply believing in a democratic, international, and humanistic future for which Americans had a special destiny to pave the way. This classic liberalist ideology was in line with President Roosevelt's intentions, and became clearly articulated by Henry Luce's 1941 essay "American Century," which advocated for the United States, as the greatest example of democracy, to take on the mantle of world leadership – and protection. Dorothy Thompson was an early and adamant adopter of this liberal internationalist mindset and she intentionally used her impressive platform to influence others to move in this direction. As historian Andrew Johnstone has articulated, internationalism as a concept in the interwar period referred to those who advocated for a cooperative and multilateral international effort to create a more

⁴ Peter Kurth, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 232.

⁵ See Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, Vol. 2. (New York: Viking, 1992), 5-6. Cook emphasizes that ER believed strongly in these principles, but her ability to take action was restricted given her political status.

just and peaceful world.⁶ In Thompson's mind, Nazism posed the ultimate threat to this vision and she made it her business to first understand and then combat this force by strongly advocating for the supremacy of liberal democracy and internationalism.

Part of Thompson's ideology was that spreading democracy went hand and hand with envisioning a world in which the universalist principles of freedom and equality could be applied and adopted in any society. This idea fit neatly into the broader internationalist vision that FDR and other liberals advocated for because it implied that if a society committed to these principles, then progress could be achieved in regard to social problems such as race and class. For Thompson, this universalist vision meant that all types of marginalized people – women, African Americans, immigrants, the poor – could belong, and succeed, in a democratic society.

While her universalist and humanist perspective led her to care about all of these marginalized groups, Thompson's anti-Nazi mission and close personal connections to the Jewish community drove her to apply her ideals to the specific plight of Jews. In Thompson's mind, Nazi ideology and modern racial antisemitism were dangerous intoxications that threatened to destroy the evolution of Jewish acceptance that had been marching along since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. By the late eighteenth century and certainly during the inter-war period, Thompson as well as other liberals tended to view Jews as a religion and ethnic group, but not a separate race. This perspective went up against those – such as Nazis, eugenicists, and other white supremacists – who

⁶ Andrew Johnstone, "Isolationism and Internationalism in American Foreign Relations," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 2011): 7–20.

advocated that Jews were a distinctive, inferior, and evil outside race that menaced others with degeneration and posed an existential threat to those around them – counter-arguments to assimilation that were brewing in Europe and the United States since the second half of the nineteenth century.⁷ Thompson was a forceful ally in the story of how American Jews became “whitened” and largely accepted in the post-war period. However, before this happened, during the interwar period the question of Jewish identity and security was far from clear cut, and Thompson’s advocacy for the Jewish community abroad and at home reveals a tedious acceptance that was constantly threatened by antisemitism. In particular, Jewish refugees attempting to flee Hitler’s Europe were seen as undesirable, which created limited options and placed the Jewish community in a tough spot. Observing this oppression, Thompson latched onto exposing the threat that Nazism posed to the American way of life, choosing to combat “the Jewish question” as her primary focus. To achieve this, she used her universal humanist ideology as well as her internationalist democratic vision for the future as the intellectual and moral counterpoints.

Thompson’s unwavering activism against Nazism and on behalf of Jewish refugees is just one vital dimension of her humanist mission and while it was her life’s most important work, unfortunately it was obscured by post-war controversies around her anti-Zionism. Of Dorothy Thompson’s tireless and multi-dimensional activism German-Jewish refugee Albert Einstein wrote, “[she] is one of the greatest forces in modern life working

⁷ Robert Michael, *A Concise History of American Antisemitism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 130 and Zachary Smith, *Age of Fear: Othering and American Identity during World War I* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 2-6.

for the freedom of humanity... she is the awakener of the American conscience.”⁸ Winston Churchill also thought highly of her multilayered efforts to preserve western ideals, remarking, “what she did can never be overestimated.”⁹

Of course, Thompson and other liberal internationalists with the same mindset can also be criticized for overlooking issues that came with seeing the United States’ system as superior to other countries or the particular struggles that marginalized groups faced within democracies. For example, part of Thompson’s advocacy for Jews was a pre-war commitment to Zionism which solved aspects of the “Jewish question,” but overlooked the Arab population in the mandate of Palestine. Originally, Thompson argued that Jews could be colonizers who spread “civilized” American ideals of democracy to the Middle East. While this thought process aligned with a well-intentioned liberal international mindset to improve the world, this vision was not without major flaws that would later be challenged by post-colonial thinkers. Interestingly, in the post-war world Thompson was flexible enough in mind that she altered her opinion about Zionism which many Jews took as a betrayal from an important ally – a story that will be explored in the latter part of this thesis. Thompson’s fiery spirit for the causes she believed in and a willingness to change her mind, and her strategy, were perhaps her most effective traits when confronting Nazism and a complacent American public. Ironically, they were also the traits that got her into trouble because she refused to be silenced or placed into a rigidly defined box.

⁸ Letter from Albert Einstein, 20 January 1939, Scrapbook 32: Letterbook 24 Jan 1939 - Dorothy Thompson honorary dinner, Oversized Material, DT Papers.

⁹ Vincent Sheean, *Dorothy and Red* (Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 262.

Methods

One of Dorothy Thompson's lifelong friends and a fellow journalist, John Gunther, once commented that those around her noticed a historical "sense of mission." Supposedly, she regarded "every paper as worth preserving" – which is true considering the amount of material she left behind.¹⁰ Perhaps this foresight, or obsession, had roots in her academic training as an historian, or maybe it was purely due to the time period in which she found herself living. She witnessed revolutionary upheaval, international uncertainty, and the darkest corners of humanity. Therefore, it would not come as a surprise if Thompson hoped for, or at least anticipated, a future historian pouring over her personal papers, trying to tell the world exactly what she contributed or using her remarkable perspective as a lens into the past. This thesis attempts to do both.

The methods used here focus on the personal history of a woman who has been overshadowed by overarching political and structural histories that made little room for non-governmental actors or agencies. Historian Saul Friedlaender wrote of Holocaust research, "the only concrete history that can be retrieved remains that carried by personal stories."¹¹ While this is not the only way to construct history, it is in this same vein that I have used Dorothy Thompson as an extraordinary lens into this period, revealing the possibilities and limits of action for one major, but underrepresented, individual. Thompson offers a window into individual convictions as well as transnational relationships and networks that facilitated proactive American responses to Nazism and the

¹⁰ Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 31.

¹¹ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution: 1933-1939* (Harper Perennial, 1998), 5.

Holocaust that are not typically considered. Not only does this method provide a significant American “resistance” history of this period, but Thompson’s unique mission and the obstacles she was presented with along the way also highlight aspects of the bystander narrative, showing the competing forces of American society including citizens’ movements, segments of the government, and the majority of the press. Therefore, this story is a combination of viewing history with an eye to structural and societal forces, while deeply engaging with the intentions and actions of an individual who operated within these circumstances.

In order to explore Thompson’s personal mission during the Nazi years and to comment on the wider American narrative, the majority of sources in this thesis have been overlooked or underutilized in traditional histories of this period, which did not focus on private citizens’ responses or women. The main depository of Thompson’s papers in the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University has been invaluable to this research. Because Thompson has been relatively underappreciated, these papers have not been mined by historians and this thesis provides a plethora of unused material. In addition, this thesis draws from other collections relating to Thompson at the FDR Presidential Library and Museum, the National Archives at College Park, the Library of Congress, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Columbia University, Princeton University, and Yale University. These archives also contain sources from people in Thompson’s wider network, revealing more about her personally, the heights that her activism reached, as well as the transnational and organizational aspects of her response to Nazism and the Holocaust. Furthermore, this thesis integrates many of Thompson’s published writings as well as diaries and memoirs from contemporaries closely associated with her, some of

whom were her enemies, some of whom were friends and refugees that she helped, and some of whom were involved with her in coordinated resistance efforts.

By using archival sources such as letters, diaries, books, newspapers, speeches, and manuscripts, this thesis argues that Thompson consistently offered three impressive contributions to push against apathy throughout the 1930s and 1940s: educating the American masses about Nazism and its threat; warning of the specific Jewish plight; and demonstrating and initiating political and humanitarian activism as Nazi policy and American policy evolved. This research showcases the persistent and courageous efforts of an influential woman who waged her own war on Nazism and successfully fought for Jewish refugees in a variety of ways. Her story highlights and challenges the American bystander narrative, expanding the historical analysis of the American and transnational response to Nazism and Jewish persecution by examining avenues of resistance that were up against forceful forms of indifference, even reluctance, from varying segments of society.

More specifically, looking at the actions of Dorothy Thompson reveals what could have been known about Nazism and the plight of European Jews if one was paying attention and it also indicates what was, and was not possible, to accomplish for a well-connected cosmopolitan individual with a prominent platform in an atmosphere of political complexity and social apathy. Within this context, Thompson used her unique position to wage a war of words and actions against Nazism abroad and at home. This research also examines Thompson's relative freedom to champion what others deemed "Jewish issues" and her connections among American Jewish circles who lauded her efforts when many were too fearful to speak out themselves. It also explores her network of acquaintances

from Germany, Austria, and Britain, as well as Jewish refugees from across Europe and citizens within America to showcase a broad transatlantic resistance to Hitler's Germany while simultaneously expanding upon Thompson's individual reach, influence, and limitations in informal circles and formal organizations. Finally, it looks at why Thompson fell out of favor with Zionist Jews and the general public toward the end of her life and how her consistent and courageous intentions and actions during the 30s and 40s have been overshadowed by the post-war narrative that she was overwhelmingly pro-Arab and anti-Zionist.

This thesis is organized chronologically into seven chapters, following Thompson's mission, starting from childhood, with a focus on how the defeat of Nazism became her cause, and why European Jews were so close to her heart. Chapter 1 examines Thompson's upbringing with a close look at her personality and drive that put her on a unique path of becoming a female journalist and expert in foreign affairs. This chapter also highlights Thompson's formative years in Europe and the networks of personal connections that she cultivated. It ends with a discussion of her famed interview with Adolf Hitler, which began her public campaign against Nazism. Chapter 2 looks at Thompson's prescient perceptions of Nazi ideology, policy, and Jewish persecution, her newsworthy expulsion for being so critical of the Third Reich, her subsequent fame in the US, and the personal beginnings of her humanitarian activism on behalf of refugees. Chapter 3 further illuminates the plight of Jewish refugees, the American atmosphere of isolation and anti-immigration, Thompson's public reporting, her relationship with the American Jewish community, her growing private influence with a strong network of prominent Americans, and the role she played with Sinclair Lewis' novel, *It Can't Happen Here*. Chapter 4 focuses on the watershed year

of 1938, when the refugee crisis proliferated and Thompson began to organize public and private action campaigns. It looks at Thompson's previously hidden role in the organizing of the Evian Conference and the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees. Chapter 5 picks up on this same theme, examining *Kristallnacht* and Thompson's humanitarian initiatives in its aftermath. This chapter also tells the story of Thompson's individual sponsorship of a number of refugees and her relationships with them. Chapter 6 examines Thompson's and America's response to Germany's expansion across the map of Europe and also dissects the tension between isolationists and interventionists inside the United States. Specifically, it highlights Thompson's organizational influence, her personal advisory role to FDR, her defense of democracy and partnership with British agents, and her continued work for refugees as an important member of the Emergency Rescue Committee. Chapter 7 analyzes Thompson's reporting on the Holocaust and her war-time initiatives to bring awareness about and comprehension of the dimensions of the extermination program. It also looks at her vision for a democratic post-war world and her pre-war advocacy for Zionism. Lastly, the conclusion tells the story of the disappointing end to her life and how she gained an inaccurate post-war reputation of being little more than an outspoken journalist and a fierce anti-Zionist.

Historiographic Grounding

There are two main bodies of literature with which this thesis is in conversation. The first being the direct biographical works on Dorothy Thompson and the second being the literature concerning the United States, Nazi Germany, and the Holocaust. This second category can be broken into sub-sections of historical inquiry such as political

investigations into the refugee crisis, the media and the governmental response to Nazi Germany's murder of European Jews, and the American Jewish response to the plight of their European counterparts. In addition to these wider historiographical threads, this research about Dorothy Thompson must also consider literature on journalism in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as literature that highlights prominent women who found places for themselves in traditionally male spheres, and finally, literature about international intellectual and cultural circles that were interested in pushing liberal and cosmopolitan ideas.

The field of Holocaust history originated with a focus on the general categories of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. According to many scholars, the United States, as well as other Western powers, usually fell into the third category. "Bystander history" has been the most geographically common method of inquiry into the Holocaust. It has traditionally looked at two types of "bystanders," internal and external. Internally the involvement of "ordinary" Germans and citizens of the affected European countries has been the primary focus. Externally the international powers have been scrutinized as onlookers, and to a minimal extent, praised as rescuers. Therefore, the history of the American reaction to the Third Reich naturally blossomed as a field of external "bystander" research within the wider context of Holocaust scholarship. This particular realm of scholarship, like the entire field, began slowly in the early 1960s and blew up in the 1980s, with a steady stream of interest thereafter.

Inquiries in this sub-field have historically produced political and social histories, all attempting a transnational approach to German, Jewish, and American history. Seminal works such as Henry Feingold's *Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the*

Holocaust, 1938-1945 and provocative works, such as David Wyman's *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941*¹² and *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945*,¹³ examined how the government and the American masses, Jewish and non-Jewish, reacted to the policies and initiatives of the Third Reich, posing questions such as why there was relatively limited action to aid refugees and who was involved in preventing popular mobilization, action, and rescue. Most of these histories can be classified as political, revolving around the White House, the State Department, and Congress. Then, some historians, such as Deborah Lipstadt and Laurel Leff began to ask what kind of knowledge Americans actually possessed.¹⁴ Lipstadt examined the actions taken by individual members of the press to inform the American public of Hitler's regime as well as the overall lack of attention by entire news outlets because many did not grasp the centrality of Nazi antisemitism. Essentially, Lipstadt argued that the horrors being reported were "beyond belief" or inaccurate, contributing to a confused American public. Leff's book focused on how the press consistently "buried" the evidence in the back pages of the news, leaving many Americans uninformed about the severity of persecution. Furthermore, works such as Andrew Nagorski's *Hitlerland*¹⁵ and Madelon Schilpp and

¹² David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968).

¹³ David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

¹⁴ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust 1933 – 1945* (New York: Free Press, 1993); Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Andrew Nagorski, *Hitlerland: American Eyewitnesses to the Nazis Rise to Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

Sharon Murphey's *Great Women of the Press*,¹⁶ offer overviews of 1930s and 1940s journalism and give contrasting examples to Thompson's reporting. This line of inquiry broadened the scope of apathy to the American press and masses, but many historians, still insisted that more could, or should, have been done to aid European Jews.

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s the notion of America as a guilty bystander was increasingly challenged. This reevaluation produced historicist critiques and a desire for balanced accounts that stressed contextual questions instead of moral ones.¹⁷ This literature uncovered the impact of the 1924 anti-immigration laws, the Great Depression, and the internal political pressures and bureaucratic "red tape" that contributed to the government's limited response, or lack of response, to the refugee crisis and the Holocaust. Key works like Richard Breitman and Alan Kraut's *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945*,¹⁸ Robert Rosen's *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust*,¹⁹ Michaela Moore's *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism, 1933-1945*,²⁰ and Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman's *FDR and the Jews*²¹ are vital to understanding the political and social climate in which Americans lived during the 1930s and early 1940s. Importantly, these works do not generally include Thompson or her campaigns, and if they

¹⁶ Madelon Golden Schilpp and Sharon Murphy, *Great Women of the Press* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983).

¹⁷ One example being Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Richard Breitman, *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned, What the British and Americans Knew* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

¹⁸ Breitman and Kraut, *American Refugee Policy*.

¹⁹ Robert Rosen, *Saving the Jews: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Holocaust* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006).

²⁰ Michaela Hoenicke Moore, *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism, 1933 - 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014).

²¹ One example being Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

do, they usually highlight that her reporting was an exception to the rule of apathy and do not provide any further detail. Currently scholars in this sub-field are producing individual case studies, biographies, and works that utilize previously absent historical lenses.²² This historiographical evolution has resulted in a broadening of subject matter, allowing for interpretations that stress varying degrees of American apathy and action, which is just what this thesis intends to do.

Scholarship about the American perspective on Nazism and the Jewish refugee crisis is one of continued historical interest. This research into Dorothy Thompson fits into the broadening scope of the field. Thompson serves as a highly complex biographical topic, as well as a fascinating case study for American journalism and the duality of foreign resistance and disinterest surrounding the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust. While most Americans were internally preoccupied with the Great Depression and avoiding a second world war, Thompson was globally and morally focused, trying to sway public opinion to actively condemn Hitler's fascism and assist European Jews. Therefore, her story sheds light on what Americans were able to understand throughout the 1930s about the Third Reich. Thompson's mission also illuminates the American bystander narrative by offering a look at a prominent individual who took action herself and created ways for the American public to join in. This research not only adds to the intricate narrative of the American press, public, and governmental response, it also gives a voice to this influential, yet underappreciated, woman who was determined that America should not be a guilty bystander.

²² Ibid.

Presently, Thompson is not widely researched and this investigation into her life during the 1930s and 1940s narrows in on her relentless personal and public actions to aid Jewish refugees and make the internally focused American public and government conscious of Hitler's threat to the democratic world. The current literature on Thompson is limited in scope and depth. Previously there have only been two full-scale biographies written solely of her, Marion K. Sanders's *Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time*²³ and Peter Kurth's *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*.²⁴ The first was published in 1973 and the second was published in 1990, showcasing the rather scarce scholarship on Thompson as an important historical figure. Recently a third biography titled, *Dorothy Thompson and German Writers in Defense of Democracy*, was published by Karina von Tippelskirch, a professor of German and focuses on Thompson and her anti-Nazi network of Germans.²⁵ These biographies cover the entire life of Thompson, and largely focus on her personal life, journalistic career, and relationships. On the contrary, this thesis narrows in on her life's work of anti-Nazi activism and analyzes her political and humanitarian initiatives for Jews between 1931-1945. Furthermore, the previous books written about Thompson have not been penned by a historian, leaving much to be desired when it comes to contextualizing and analyzing her unique understanding of Nazism as it relates to unfolding policy and how her specific activism for Jews fits into the wider picture of this period. Lastly, these biographies, while well-sourced in their own right, do not offer a consistent narrative about her focus on Jewish persecution or the mission behind her

²³ Marion K. Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

²⁴ Kurth, *American Cassandra*.

²⁵ Karina von Tippelskirch, *Dorothy Thompson and German Writers in Defense of Democracy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017).

multilayered activism, themes that become clearer when one uses sources in addition to her own papers. By using what is housed at major archives such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress, this thesis provides those missing materials.

The remaining literature consulted contextualizes Thompson's ideas and actions or it concerns those personalities, organizations, or missions that she was associated with. This research further emphasizes that Thompson is an interesting nexus from which to view this period. Closely examining her involvement provides a glimpse into American knowledge about and response to Hitler's Germany because Thompson simultaneously highlights the issue of American inaction while also challenging the flattened notion that Americans were nothing but apathetic. When compared to the context she was in, her efforts show that like-minded Americans could and did know pertinent information about the situation in Europe and care about those being persecuted. Thompson's story also showcases an exceptional individual's agency to act within an environment of indifference, revealing that campaigns were most successful on a personal and non-political level. However, despite her individual triumphs fighting Nazism and helping Jewish refugees, Dorothy Thompson's story also offers more information about the difficult structural barriers of refugee and immigration policy, the currents of American isolationist and antisemitic sentiment that she had to work against, the limits of domestic aid actions and the bureaucratic and congressional restrictions that even the most determined and well-connected individual ran up against when it came to mounting a foreign and formidable resistance to Nazism and the Holocaust.

Ultimately, this research aims to add depth to the discussion of an American response, journalism, antisemitism, anti-war attitudes and inaction throughout the 1930s and 1940s, exposing more evidence for a diversity of individual American reactions to Nazism and the Holocaust. It reveals one influential woman's intentions and far-reaching actions of resistance while also helping to correct the popular historical memory about her. Moreover, it invites investigation about individual and organizational acts of American resistance against Nazism, especially imploring scholars to think about how women engaged in solitary efforts as well as in various networks of resistance. By tracing one individual's extensive web of information, connections, and actions, this research underscores the usefulness of exploring this period through specific case studies and from a transnational framework. It aims to show that while many Americans were apathetic, others, such as a significant woman named Dorothy Thompson, were extremely conscious cosmopolitan-minded advocates who had varying levels of success at mounting democratic action against the global humanitarian and political threat of National Socialism.

CHAPTER 1 : DOROTHY THOMPSON’S BEGINNINGS, PRE-1931

The Childhood of a “Brainy Girl”

Dorothy Thompson was born on July 9, 1893 and grew up around the Genesee Valley in upstate New York. Of her childhood Thompson wrote,

We were poor -- sub marginal... My father never had an automobile or a radio... I had two dresses, I remember, one for every day and one for Sundays... There was no money for amusements... Education was something you had to wangle for -- in scholarships.¹

Yet, she also recalled that her father taught her that charity for others was a necessity. Her childhood was certainly located in white Protestant America, providing a sheltered lifestyle and, thanks to her Methodist preacher father, instilling in her an amplified moral consciousness. Indeed, she often said that nations “should be smart enough to get along together. Were they not all composed of human beings? And were not human beings beholden to God almighty?”² Perhaps hinting at a motivation for her later activities, Thompson wrote in her never-finished autobiography that her father once told her to “never persecute a Jew” because they gave “us” our religion and many other positive things in the world.³ This relatively homogenous and pious upbringing also inspired her spirited personality, always seeming to be “in search of adventure or escape from an oppressive

¹ “Government Can’t Do it All” article, Published articles, 1936-1939 folder, box 109, Published speeches and articles, Manuscripts, DT Papers.

² Dale Warren, *I Remember Dorothy* (Syracuse Library Associates, 1964,) 2. Warren was a close personal friend to Thompson and her editor at Houghton Mifflin Co. Publishing.

³ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 24.

situation.”⁴ From a young age Thompson stood out for her intelligence, consistently bringing home all A’s.⁵

After losing her mother to a pregnancy complication when she was just eight years old and enduring a hated stepmother until the age of fourteen, Thompson was sent to live with her two aunts in Chicago, where the “brainy” girl could take advantage of more opportunities.⁶ She was enrolled at Lewis Institute, a junior college with a reputation for exceptional education. In the humanities Thompson’s brilliance showed; she immersed herself in the studies of English, history, French, German and Latin.⁷ While there, she developed a serious love of learning and was challenged by her English teacher, Dr. Edwin Herbert Lewis. Later in life Thompson recalled a day when he told the all-girls class, “Here I try to introduce you to sheer magic, but all you will ever be good for is to rustle pots and pans.” Thompson remembered thinking to herself, “No, I won’t.”⁸ From then on, she was determined to prove him and other like-minded men wrong. One way she showcased her intellectual abilities was by honing her debate skills and defiantly marching up to his desk to address him directly during heated discussions, an early display of Thompson’s fiery bravery. Her personality was clear from early on; she admitted to always following her instincts, being driven by emotion, and then integrating those feelings with intellect. As her good friend and editor Dale Warren observed, “what she thought most strongly, she felt most strongly.”⁹ Another close friend, Meyer Weisgal, noted that Thompson was “a

⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁵ Ibid, 9.

⁶ Ibid, 13.

⁷ Schlipp and Murphy, *Great Women of the Press*, 169.

⁸ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 14.

⁹ Warren, *I Remember Dorothy*, 7.

volcano of temperament and excitability,” using her personality to “always carry a banner for some cause or another.”¹⁰

In 1912, Thompson graduated with an Associate of Arts degree from Lewis and was ready to enroll in college as a junior. She longed for an East Coast Ivy League education but ended up at Syracuse University out of financial necessity; as a minister’s daughter she only had to pay \$120 a year.¹¹ There she majored in English and European and American History. In college Thompson was described as “a slim, dark-haired girl” who “wrote poetry, ran student activities, made speeches and ‘A’ grades much to the amazement and envy of less talented and energetic classmates.”¹² Originally intending to be a teacher, she was part of various groups such as Kappa Pi Sigma, an honorary pedagogical sorority, but she found her clearest voice as a campus leader for women’s suffrage.¹³ Thompson felt at home with the long-standing feminist tradition at Syracuse and became a leading member of the Syracuse Equal Suffrage Club.

A Woman’s Place

After her graduation in 1914, Thompson thought she wanted to be a teacher and a writer, but after failing her teaching exam and without any connections to the literary and publishing worlds, she decided to devote her “energy and ability [to] active participation

¹⁰ Meyer Wolfe Weisgal, *Meyer Weisgal ... so Far; an Autobiography* (New York, Random House, 1972), 194.

¹¹ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 16.

¹² Newspaper clipping, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 folder, box 73, Articles About Dorothy Thompson 1914-1961, DT Papers.

¹³ Newspaper clipping, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 folder, box 73, Articles About Dorothy Thompson 1914-1961, DT Papers.

in the campaign for equal suffrage.”¹⁴ Gaining skills that would serve her well in the future, she traveled around upstate New York as a soapbox orator, organizer, and fund raiser for the cause.¹⁵ Thompson remembered herself and those she worked with as “radicals, liberals and reactionaries; raving beauties and plain as pikestaffs; demanding the vote or sweetly pleading for it. Leaders, speakers and organizers, paid and unpaid, came from every social group and embraced as many political and social ideas as there were in the nation. It was an education in politics, publicity, public speaking, organization and insight into every variety of the human condition ... a natural stepping stone to the field where by then I knew my chief interest lay: journalism.”¹⁶ In the suffrage movement she worked under a woman named Gertrude Tone of Niagara Falls, who became the first of two influential mother figures for her.¹⁷ While under Tone’s guidance, Thompson met Barbara De Porte, a Russian born Sephardic Jew. At twenty-four, this was Thompson’s first exposure to a Jewish individual, and because of her previously homogeneous background and the close new friendship, she quickly became a self-professed philosemite.

After New York state granted women the right to vote in 1917, the two friends decided they wanted to leave the world of politics and become journalists. During this period many efforts were made to keep women out of “serious” journalism and Thompson lamented that “talented, college-educated women journalists were restricted to covering

¹⁴ Newspaper clipping, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 folder, box 73, Articles About Dorothy Thompson 1914-1961, DT Papers.

¹⁵ Schlipp and Murphy, *Great Women of the Press*, 170.

¹⁶ Susan Ware, *Letter to the World: Seven Women Who Shaped the American Century* (New York: WW Norton, 1998), 50 and Perry J. Ashley, *American Newspaper Journalists, 1926-195* (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research Co., 1984), 344.

¹⁷ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 23.

‘women’s stuff,’ such as society, women’s clubs, and the domestic arts, rather than given a chance to break free and learn to cover hard news.”¹⁸ In an attempt to break another glass ceiling the two friends moved to New York City, shared Gertrude Tone’s duplex apartment, and searched for a way into the male-dominated profession.¹⁹

In 1920, after working numerous lowly jobs, such as creating social service advertisements,²⁰ to make ends meet, Thompson and De Porte decided to purchase one-way steamship tickets to Europe and use the \$500 they had between them to jumpstart their dream careers as foreign correspondents.²¹ In another twist of fate pushing Thompson toward her future, she found herself on a boat among many American Zionists who were travelling to the World Zionist Conference in London. After spending time with them she wrote home to a friend, “I think I shall perhaps become the leading Gentile authority on Judaism.”²²

In describing her own decision to go abroad, Thompson later said, “I had an idea that I would be able to do newspaper articles, but not the faintest notion where they would be published.”²³ Soon after arriving on the continent she was given an opportunity to publish when Earl Reeves, chief of the International News Service in London, made her and De Porte string correspondents, providing an opportunity to travel across Europe to report on breaking news. Thompson covered political stories in Russia, Hungary, Austria,

¹⁸ Donna L. Halper, *Invisible Stars: A Social History of Women in American Broadcasting* (Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2014), 36.

¹⁹ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 25.

²⁰ “Things Happen Where Dorothy Thompson Happens,” *Town Weekly Magazine*, February 18, 1938, 7.

²¹ Schlipp and Murphy, *Great Women of the Press*, 170.

²² Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 38.

²³ Newspaper clipping from 18 November 1934, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 folder, box 73, Articles About Dorothy Thompson 1914-1961, DT Papers.

Ireland and beyond. For Thompson this career path seemed to fulfill many of her desires.

In a self-reflecting moment, she wrote,

What I need: More knowledge. What I Prize: Human relationships of all kinds. What I want: A home which will be the center of life & illumination for people who can really contribute to the development of the humanities. My gifts: Interpretive; power to draw out & record others. My interests: all humanities. Politics; literature...etc. My passion: creative men.²⁴

As her travels in Europe soon reveal, these desires of a “modern” woman would all be realized and these “formative years abroad” would provide her “background and perspective” with which to meet the challenging years to come.²⁵

Early European Travels

Soon after their arrival in Europe, De Porte married, and the two women took separate journalistic paths. In 1921, Thompson was taken under the wing of Marcel Foder, a Hungarian-born correspondent for the Manchester *Guardian* who was deeply interested in central European politics.²⁶ Under his guidance Thompson went to Vienna as a correspondent for the American Red Cross and the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, assigned to cover Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. During this time, she spent hours with other writers and intellectuals at Sacher’s Hotel debating international affairs. It was there that she met her first husband, a “dark handsome Hungarian Jew” named Josef Bard. Bard was an aspiring writer and a known heartbreaker, yet Thompson was so taken that she married him in 1922.²⁷

²⁴ Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 125-26.

²⁵ Warren, *I Remember Dorothy*, 8.

²⁶ Schlipp and Murphy, *Great Women of the Press*, 170.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 171.

In addition to her passionate new romance, Thompson continued to climb the journalistic ranks. In 1925, she was promoted to chief of the Central European Service for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and moved to Berlin. John Gunther, another well respected correspondent, wrote that Thompson was “blazing through Europe... like a blue-eyed tornado.”²⁸ She began to stand out among the foreign correspondents, as there was only one other American woman, Sigrid Schultz of the *Chicago Tribune*, occupying a regular status. Vincent Sheean, a close friend of Thompson remarked that she “owed her prowess...to skill, intelligence and luck, along with a good deal of hardwork... and a familiarity with the German language.”²⁹ In German cultural circles Thompson gained a brilliant reputation; she became familiar with many international notables and as a chief correspondent her salary substantially increased.³⁰

However, her growing career success irked her beloved husband, who felt outranked in talent and notoriety. Rose Wilder Lane, a close friend to Thompson, recalled that “Dorothy’s growing career left Bard in the uncomfortable position of an appendage to his wife.”³¹ A series of Bard’s infidelities resulted in his demand for a divorce in November 1926. Many friends remembered that Thompson’s deep heartbreak did not outwardly show. Vincent Sheean commented that, “It was a vitally important element in Dorothy’s greatness that she could always step over the corpses and go on, steadily, resolutely, right to the end,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 2.

³⁰ For more information on Thompson’s early relations in Berlin and Vienna see Tippelskirch, *Dorothy Thompson and German Writers in Defense of Democracy*.

³¹ William V. Holtz, *Dorothy Thompson and Rose Wilder Lane: Forty Years of Friendship: Letters, 1921-1960* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 37.

with her head held very high indeed.”³² One of the notables Thompson became familiar with was psycho-analyst, Sigmund Freud, who advised her to move on by “buy[ing] a new wardrobe and chang[ing] the color of [her] lipstick.”³³ Though she was struggling internally, Thompson was resilient on the outside, focusing herself even more intently on her work and in 1927 she was appointed to head the *New York Post’s* Berlin Bureau, making her the first woman to lead an important foreign news bureau.

During this period, Dorothy Thompson became somewhat of a saloniere, hosting lavish parties where she entertained and directed conversations among key artistic, literary, intellectual, and political figures. She drew in interesting people, both educating herself and suggesting topics for others to pursue.³⁴ Thompson learned this role from a second mother-like figure – Frau Doktor Eugenie Schwarzwald. A pioneering Austrian-Jewish woman active in the education reform movement founding girls’ and primary schools, she kept an open house which she operated like a salon.³⁵ The European salon was a combination of close friends and persons of renown, an environment in which the hostess could nurture great men but also compete with them.³⁶ This tradition of middle and upper class women having “private conversations that changed public life” was also a German-Jewish phenomenon.³⁷ A dissemination of French Revolution ideas, salons of Jewish

³² Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 4.

³³ Warren, *I Remember Dorothy*, 8.

³⁴ Ware, *Letter to the World*, 50.

³⁵ Günter Bischof, Fritz Plasser, and Eva Maltschnig, *Austrian Lives* (New Orleans: UNO Press Innsbruck, 2012), 190.

³⁶ Emily Bilski, Emily Braun, Leon Botstein, and Jewish Museum, eds., *Jewish Women and Their Salons: The Power of Conversation* (New York : New Haven: Jewish Museum; Yale University Press, 2005) 2.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 1.

women first appeared in Berlin in the 1780s,³⁸ and these women worked as “civilizing ambassadors” for their people.³⁹ This was certainly the case for Thompson and others pulled into Schwarzwald’s wide circle, flooding them with liberal ideas and inspiring non-Jewish devotion to Jewish acceptance.

In the 20s, Schwarzwald took the young Thompson under her wing and instilled in her many of these salon values. It was primarily through Schwarzwald that Thompson gained important European contacts who would later become vital informants on Nazism. One of these connections was Helmuth James von Moltke who became an important German resistance figure and someone Thompson utilized in a future anti-Nazi campaign.⁴⁰ Thompson met him through Schwarzwald and they continued to stay in touch throughout the Nazi years, including attempts to communicate during the war. In 1948, Thompson remarked that Schwarzwald had “awakened a sense of mission”⁴¹ in the young von Moltke. Interestingly, Schwarzwald had made the very same impression on Thompson’s own mind, providing a sense of mission that would drive her future conduct and providing her the saloniere model that she would export to New York and use to gather her own information and sway key Americans in her favor. Later, Schwarzwald also imparted to Thompson a valuable lesson which she held onto throughout her fight against Nazism and on behalf of Jews. On her deathbed Schwarzwald told Thompson the following: “Never forget Dorothy...Never forget that all this horror didn’t start just with

³⁸ Ibid, 15.

³⁹ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁰ Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby, *Helmuth von Moltke; a leader against Hitler* (New York St. Martin's Press, 1973), 25.

⁴¹ Dorothy Thompson, “The Developments of Our Times,” (Lecture, Stetson University, 1948), 23.

Hitler's coming to power. Everybody is in some degree guilty – I, too, you, too – for great catastrophes aren't caused by one man. Hitler was a result as well as a cause. Pray for Europe, and pray for Germany, Dorothy."⁴² As Thompson's mission unfolded, this thought sustained her; pushing her toward advocacy and asking for others to resist apathy. During her time in Europe learning from Schwarzwald, Thompson was already hoping to gain a name for herself back home and impart to others her many ideas, remarking: "This isn't enough for me. It's not what I really want. I'm nothing in my own country. I want to be something there – something no other woman has been yet."⁴³

Reporting in Weimar Germany

In 1920s Berlin, Thompson had a fascinating world to observe and write about. After World War I, Berlin was the central political battlefield in the country; the chaos was palpable and reporters could not get enough. In the cultural sense too, Berlin seemed to be the capital of the world. Thompson wrote, "These were the days when the German mind was open to every stream of thought from every part of the earth. Every current beat upon Berlin."⁴⁴ In these years there were fifty American correspondents representing a variety of notable and small newspapers.⁴⁵ The Adlon Hotel served as the hangout spot for these journalists and other prominent writers and intellectuals. The Americans with whom Thompson shared the field with were highly respected newspapermen. To name a few, Hubert Renfro Knickerbocker was Thompson's direct colleague at the same newspapers

⁴² Dorothy Thompson, *The Courage to Be Happy* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 23 ; Dorothy Thompson, "The Development of Our Times" (Lecture, Stetson University, 1948).

⁴³ Ware, *Letter to the World*, 52.

⁴⁴ Carl Zuckmayer, *Second Wind* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co, inc, 1940), VIII.

⁴⁵ Nagorski, *Hitlerland*, 6.

and Edgar Ansel Mowrer wrote for the *Chicago Daily News*.⁴⁶ Thompson became close to Mowrer and his wife Lilian, sharing a duplex apartment on Haendelstrasse in Berlin.⁴⁷

For most of these American correspondents the ramblings of Adolf Hitler and a small band of radical followers did not cause serious alarm. Knickerbocker first saw Hitler in August 1923 and called him “silly...a caricature of himself.”⁴⁸ In the early 1920s, Thompson, too, seemed more interested in her liberal, intellectual, and artistic circle of friends, the problem of German inflation and the communist threat from the left than the noisy right-wing Munich beer hall gang.⁴⁹ S. Miles Bouton of the *Baltimore Sun* later described the Weimar years saying, “There was still no indication in 1928 of the coming pogroms that were to sully Germany’s repute five years later.”⁵⁰

Marriage to Sinclair Lewis

While Thompson was gaining fame in her career and moving in Berlin’s Weimar era circles, she was taken by surprise in her personal life by a new creative man. On Thursday, July 9, 1927, in the German tradition she decided to throw a large birthday party for herself. She invited many acquaintances from journalistic, intellectual, and literary realms. One guest was previously unknown to her, the famed American author Sinclair Lewis. Vincent Sheean recalled that they were drawn to each other instantly. Lewis was so enamored that he told her of his dream for a farmhouse in Vermont and how she was the

⁴⁶ Ibid, 39.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 55.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 40.

⁴⁹ Stanley L. Harrison, *Twentieth-Century Journalists: America’s Opinion-makers* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 2002), 124.

⁵⁰ Nagorski, *Hiterland*, 62.

only woman who could fulfill his vision.⁵¹ Lewis was persistent and in 1928, Thompson, perhaps vowing not to make the same “mistakes” as in her last marriage, resigned from her top bureau position to marry Lewis in London. After that summer, “with the intention to subordinate her own career to the greater talents of her husband,” the newlyweds moved back to the United States, occupying both a home in New York City and buying a summer property they named “Twin Farms” in rural Barnard, Vermont.⁵²

However, keeping the promise to her teenage self, it was not in Thompson’s nature to completely give up her own career to become a housewife – as stated, she had greater aspirations for herself upon return to the United States. At first, Lewis was highly supportive of his wife’s plans to lecture on the European situation and continue to write for various newspapers. In November 1929, Thompson gave one of her first American lectures. Speaking to an audience at Syracuse University she entitled her talk “The Patriotism of Peace.” This lecture is representative of others that she gave in these early years. She focused on the German financial crisis and political unrest, urging Americans to pay attention to foreign affairs. A local newspaper commented on her ability to captivate an audience, stating,

The complete silence and close attention of the entire audience attested to the fact that the speaker, drawing upon her experiences as post-war correspondent for American newspapers in most of the principal cities of Europe, was presenting a first-hand picture of the present state of peace in Europe which furnished an impressive experience for her audience.⁵³

⁵¹ Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 23.

⁵² Holtz, *Dorothy Thompson and Rose Wilder Lane*, 79.

⁵³ Newspaper clipping from November 1934, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 folder, box 73, Articles About Dorothy Thompson 1914-1961, DT Papers.

In 1929, the political tide in Germany was becoming favorable for the right-wing Nazi party. The Nazis' fight against the Young Plan to establish a new schedule for German reparation payments gave them national recognition.⁵⁴ Consequently, the Nazis' popularity grew and in that year NSDAP membership doubled in size. To make matters worse, the October 24 stock market crash in New York plunged the United States into the Great Depression, immediately having a drastic effect on Germany. As a result, the "Great Coalition" government between the Social Democrats and the conservative DVP split because of differing opinions on how to handle the drastic economic conditions, creating a convenient opening for the Nazi party⁵⁵

With this turmoil as a backdrop, Thompson continued to lecture in the United States. She told her attentive listeners that in the present time there are many "contending ideas" against representative democracy. It is here that she displayed one of her early insights into Germany, stating that she found a "strong desire for a military coup to regain the lost prestige of Germany... [and] a sense of wrong so deep-seated that something must be done about it."⁵⁶ Reminding the audience of a delicate balance between war and peace, Thompson made the first of many later pleas for increased American interest in European affairs, stating that for the country to decide to pay attention at the last moment, "in a time of great emotional stress... has in the past seldom proved a very reliable method of assuring peace."⁵⁷ These early lectures demonstrate how Thompson started to make a reputation for

⁵⁴ Joseph W. Bendersky, *A Concise History of Nazi Germany* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2013), 59.

⁵⁵ Bendersky, *A Concise History of Nazi Germany*, 62.

⁵⁶ Newspaper clipping from 1934, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 folder, box 73, Articles About Dorothy Thompson 1914-1961, DT Papers.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

herself; many listeners noticed her keen political awareness and admired how she analyzed her European experience and made it applicable to the American experience. From the outset, Thompson latched onto the notion that democracy could fall under serious threat.

Return to Germany: 1930-1931

In March 1930, the alliance of democratic parties in the *Reichstag* collapsed with the resignation of Hermann Müller, and from afar Thompson continued to keep a close eye on German affairs.⁵⁸ The situation worsened after the German parliament rescinded Chancellor Bruening's emergency economic decrees. Bruening called for dissolving the *Reichstag* and new elections were held in September 1930.⁵⁹ Because of this, a political vacuum was created which offered the Nazis their greatest opportunity within the weak coalition government.⁶⁰ In these elections the Nazi party became the second largest political party in parliament, increasing from 12 seats in 1928 to 107.⁶¹ This deteriorating political climate and the inability to form a functioning coalition government made room for Nazi exploitation.

In the United States Thompson had recently become a mother to her only biological child, Michael Lewis. However, as soon as the opportunity presented itself, she raced back to Europe to report on the political crisis. Leaving the young baby with Rose Wilder Lane,

⁵⁸ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 160.

⁵⁹ Bendersky, *A Concise History*, 64.

⁶⁰ Karl A. Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy toward German Jews, 1933-1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 56.

⁶¹ Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*, 67.

Thompson went to Europe with her husband to accept his Nobel Prize for literature in December 1930.⁶² With the Nazi party gaining prominence within the *Reichstag* and with Germany's future "being decided on the streets,"⁶³ Thompson extended her quick trip for another three months. A burning interest in Hitler and the Nazi movement, still "not taken very seriously by most observers,"⁶⁴ had been piqued. Her new goal was to understand this fascist force.

That winter Thompson hoped to gather information about the Nazi surge and used her many personal connections to gain insights. She recorded her encounters and thoughts in a diary. One telling conversation between Thompson and her friend Lion Feuchtwanger, German-Jewish novelist and playwright, reveals the identity pressure that some Jews had already been subjected to. Thompson wrote, "He was continually being asked by reporters: 'Do you consider yourself a German or a Jew.' He replies: 'My head is international, my heart is Jewish, my typewriter is German.'"⁶⁵ This remark shows the identity conflict that many German Jews experienced when confronted with Nazi race ideology. Thompson also clued in on Nazi tactics of intimidation, observing that "the whole stage and press is terrorized."⁶⁶ She wrote, "it's impossible now to bring a single play of left tendency. [Bertolt] Brecht... can't produce any plays."⁶⁷ She noted that one of his new plays was apparently shut down because hundreds of letters threatening to blow up the theater had

⁶² Holtz, *Dorothy Thompson and Rose Wilder Lane*, 79.

⁶³ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 161.

⁶⁴ Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 19.

⁶⁵ Dorothy Thompson Diary 1931, page 3, Diaries 1931-1932, 1935-36 folder, box 59, DT Papers [Hereafter DT Diary 1931].

⁶⁶ DT Diary 1931, 4.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

been sent by Nazi party members. She also realized that the radicalization of many Germans was “ripe chiefly because the entire middle class [was] gone...the inflation destroyed it.”⁶⁸

From her sources Thompson gathered that “Hitler’s success rests... on the totality of his program. Every discontent is promised something.”⁶⁹ She recognized that Hitler’s revolutionary solution appealed to many Germans who felt that their country needed stability and strength. Anticipating a Nazi surge in the polls, Thompson noted that “the moment Hitler legally comes to the govt the Republic is lost.”⁷⁰ She worried that the Nazis would use the democratic system to their advantage, even going as far as to suggest that “to save the Republic Chancellor Bruenning may have to make a coup d’état against the Republic”; in her mind this was the only way to stop a Nazi power grab.⁷¹ Picking up on the Nazi fervor Thompson asserted that, “If this doesn’t happen the German Republic is finished in 1932!” Though her prediction was a bit early, she also postulated that “the death of Hindenburg would be another catastrophe!”⁷² These initial fears that she scribbled in her diary would soon prove correct.

The Interview

Thompson then returned to the United States to see her child, but she felt she had unfinished business in Europe; namely she wanted to meet Adolf Hitler for herself.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 35.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 40.

⁷¹ Ibid, 38.

⁷² Ibid, 41.

Unsurprisingly, Thompson was not the only American reporter to desire a meeting with this potential threat. Karl Henry von Wiegand was the first American journalist to actually sit down with Hitler, meeting with him in December 1929.⁷³ Yet, it seems that Wiegand was not the first American journalist *interested* in obtaining an interview. Although she did not see the Nazi party as a serious threat to Weimar Germany at first, Thompson tried to pin down a meeting for eight years, “following [Hitler] to European inns, meetings and secret hideouts.”⁷⁴ For example, in 1923, after the failure of the Beer Hall Putsch, as the Vienna correspondent for the *Ledger*, Thompson followed Hitler to his hiding spot in Murnau at the home of Frau Hanfstaengl, the mother of Ernst Hanfstaengl, who was to become the Nazi publicity chief. Here Thompson missed him by just two hours. For the rest of the 1920s, Thompson made vain attempts to interview him in offices, hotels and jail.⁷⁵ Perhaps due to her status as an American woman and Hitler’s avoidance of interviews with foreign news outlets, she did not receive this coveted meeting until November 1931, when *Cosmopolitan* magazine gave her the assignment to return to Germany and meet this rising political force. This opportunity came about because as Hitler’s popularity grew domestically, he was encouraged to meet with foreign correspondents to boost his international fame. Ernst Hanfstaengl, now the Nazi publicity chief, tried to set up Hitler with “friendly” foreign correspondents.⁷⁶ He selected Thompson because of her known affinity for Germany.⁷⁷ However, Hanfstaengl did not quite know whom they had just

⁷³ Nagorski, *Hitlerland*, 67.

⁷⁴ Schilpp and Murphy, *Great Women of the Press*, 173.

⁷⁵ “The It Girl” April 1940 article by Margaret Case Harriman, *The New Yorker*, Clippings in Dorothy Thompson folder, box 58, Sinclair Lewis Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University [Hereafter SL Papers].

⁷⁶ Ernst Hanfstaengl, *Unheard Witness* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1957), 163.

⁷⁷ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 163.

invited for a coveted interview. Despite her love affair with German culture, Thompson was not the type of foreign correspondent that Hanfstaengl knew Hitler hoped for; she was not “a convert to Nazism in advance” and she did not become a “passionate admirer” after the interview.⁷⁸ On the contrary, she became one of the most outspoken critics of the Nazi vision – a problem Hitler would deal with once he was firmly in power.

What is known about Thompson’s Hitler interview comes from the published *Cosmopolitan* article and short book, *I Saw Hitler*.⁷⁹ Moments before she met with Hitler, she coincidentally ran into John Farrar, of Farrar & Rhinehart publishing, who offered her the opportunity to turn the interview into a book.⁸⁰ As a book review in the *New York Herald Tribune* claimed, “Dorothy Thompson had the gift of making the reader, too, see the man she saw.”⁸¹ “With that flair for conveying difficult information by reference to familiar things,” Thompson seemed to understand what her American audience wanted to know about Hitler and his strategy.⁸² Above all Thompson’s reporting stressed Hitler’s ideology, explaining to her American audience that his program was a “mixture of fascism, racialist philosophy that teaches that ‘Aryans,’ and especially ‘Nordics’ are created to rule the earth, anti-Semitism, and muddled socialism.”⁸³ She also vehemently stated that his vast following was a “patriotic, offended, middle-class mob.”⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Hanfstaengl, *Unheard Witness*, 163.

⁷⁹ Dorothy Thompson, *I Saw Hitler!* (New York: Farrar & Reinhart, Inc., 1932).

⁸⁰ Nagorski, *Hitlerland*, 83.

⁸¹ Book review of *I Saw Hitler!* by Lewis Gannett, February 1932, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 folder, box 73, Articles About Dorothy Thompson 1914-1961, DT Papers.

⁸² Book review of *I Saw Hitler!* By Harry Hansen, 24 February 1932, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 folder, box 73, Articles About Dorothy Thompson 1914-1961, DT Papers.

⁸³ Thompson, *I Saw Hitler*, V.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, VI.

The most famous line of Thompson's interview is as follows: "I was convinced that I was meeting the future dictator of Germany. In something less than fifty seconds I was quite sure I was not. It took just that time to measure the startling insignificance of this man who has set the whole world agog."⁸⁵ Calling him the "very prototype of the Little Man,"⁸⁶ Thompson's vivid depiction of Hitler's physical presence and personality was intriguing. She revealed that the interview itself was difficult because Hitler spoke as if he was addressing a mass audience:

in every question he seeks for a theme that will set him off. Then his eyes focus in some far corner of the room; a hysterical note creeps into his voice which rises sometimes almost to a scream. He gives the impression of a man in a trance. He bangs the table.⁸⁷

Thompson recounted the rules for her interview, revealing that she could only ask three questions which had to be "written out...twenty-four hours beforehand."⁸⁸ For her first question Thompson asked what he will do for the working masses when he comes to power. Hitler proceeded to babble about Germany needing a new spirit and a new ideology focused on the rebirth of Germans. Thompson pushed him to answer her question and he refused, saying that he "didn't intend to hand his program over to his enemies...for them to steal."⁸⁹ Hoping to show a threat to democracy, Thompson moved to her second question, which focused on whether he intended to abolish the Weimar Constitution. Hitler replied,

I will get into power legally. I will abolish this parliament and the Weimar constitution afterward. I will found an authority-state, from the lowest cell to the

⁸⁵ Ibid, 13.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 17.

highest instance; everywhere there will be responsibility and authority above, discipline and obedience below.⁹⁰

Thompson's final question intended to reveal how Hitler would interact on an international scale and whether or not he would abide by disarmament. Without answering the question, he ranted about making sure the German people should be unified and "secured in their honor," suggesting that his plans were not peaceful.⁹¹

In her analysis of the interview Thompson attempted to address what she knew Americans cared most about: Will Hitler actually come to power? She correctly argued that he did not have the ability to gain power by the majority vote, but rather that a coalition with the DNVP,⁹² was "eventually... quite possible."⁹³ Where Thompson began to err in her predictive analysis was stating that even if he was given the Chancellorship he would not succeed in putting through his radical plans about the constitution. Like most others, Thompson assumed that the coalition government, namely the DNVP party, could play puppet master to Hitler; almost no one thought it would be the reverse.

Despite her belief that Hitler could ultimately be controlled, Thompson did accurately articulate why he had a following in the first place. She said, "I thought him a Little Man. But perhaps there in, exactly therein, lies the secret of his enormous success."⁹⁴ She analyzed his followers as identifying with him, a mass "peasant movement" of those who felt cheated and left behind. Here she also recognized the importance of the Jewish "parasite" in Hitler's ideology, reminding her readers that "down with the Jew," one of the

⁹⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁹¹ Ibid, 20.

⁹² The German National People's Party (Deutschnationale Volkspartei).

⁹³ Thompson, *I Saw Hitler*, 22.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 23.

oldest cries in Europe, “became one of the first planks in his program.”⁹⁵ Thompson grasped the emotional appeal and contradictions inherent in Nazi ideology and recognized that at the center of his irrational argument sat the Jews; “Take the Jews out of Hitler’s program, and the whole thing, both the economic program and the racial, collapses...It doesn’t, you see make sense.”⁹⁶

Thompson concluded her book by framing the rise of Nazism and Hitler in a way that Americans could grasp. She told her readers to imagine if in the United States, “the white collared unemployed, the farmers, those who have lost their savings in bank collapses, evangelical preachers, the American Legion, the D.A.R., the Ku Klux Klan, Henry Ford” were all united.⁹⁷ If they could imagine such a mass group of discontented Americans swayed by emotion, harboring nationalistic feelings, and rallying around a charismatic leader, then they could now picture how Hitler gained favor among sections of the German public.

Previous investigations into Thompson have mischaracterized her interview with Hitler as somehow glaringly uninformed. She, far more than other journalists who wrote similarly about him, is criticized for her “greatest error in judgement.”⁹⁸ What others have objected to is that she called him “insignificant.” Yet, this relatable “insignificance” is how Thompson aptly explained his appeal to the masses. Further, it was not inaccurate for her to depict Hitler as “vulnerable, ill-poised, and insecure;” in fact, according to her meeting, he

⁹⁵ Ibid, 27.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 34.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 35.

⁹⁸ Schilpp and Murphy, *Great Women of the Press*, 174.

presented as all of those things.⁹⁹ Where she actually faltered was with the belief that the seasoned politicians could control him. Yet, other star journalists of her time such as Knickerbocker “still considered him to be a far less powerful figure than Mussolini” and he too, “predicted that President Hindenburg would have no problem keeping him in check.”¹⁰⁰ At the end of *I Saw Hitler* Thompson reminds future generations that in the context of her time no one knew what was to come. She selected a picture of a marble statue of Hitler, captioning it with the following:

Will future ages see him in marble, mounted perhaps, with ‘Liberator,’ ‘President,’ ‘Emperor,’ upon the statue’s pediment? Few men have had statues erected to them during their lifetimes; afterward art depicts them seen through the glass of time. To future historians, then, this final picture is dedicated.¹⁰¹

This description indicates how uncertain the future of Germany was and that Thompson was aware of the ambiguity. Instead of being concrete about Hitler’s trajectory, Thompson had hoped to capture a moment in time. Although her interview with Hitler was taken as a concrete prediction by the public, Thompson delivered a rather complex and honest depiction of a man and a movement that was still taking form. Above all Thompson’s interview helped inform an American audience about foreign authoritarian impulses, Hitler’s appeal to the masses, and it highlighted the all-important and precarious position that Jews occupied in this new ideology – a focus that other journalists would struggle to ascertain for years to come. At this, Thompson certainly succeeded.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Nagorski, *Hitlerland*, 75.

¹⁰¹ Thompson, *I Saw Hitler*, unnumbered last page.

About a year after the interview, Hitler was told about his perception in the foreign press. He was surprised, and a bit amused, to hear that he was being called the following: “Little Man – world menace – messiah of absurdity – reactionary – demagogue – adventurer – desperado – would be dictator – dramatical nonsense-monger – drummer-boy – mischief maker – dapper quack doctor – German Rasputin – clown – terrorist of the streets – brazen charlatan – mad apostle – Bolshevik-monarchist.” However, he was then informed of a quote ascribed to “Mrs. Lewis” that read: “When I walked into Adolf Hitler’s salon, I was convinced that I was meeting the future dictator of Germany. In less than fifty seconds I was sure I was not.”¹⁰² Hitler was not pleased with this, remarking “Hanfstaengl again! He brought this woman to me. Den burschen werde ich mir kaufen!” (I’ll let the fellow have it).¹⁰³ Clearly Thompson rubbed him the wrong way. However, Hitler thought that the foreign journalists were all “fools [who] believe that politics operate by laws of reason. No they're predominantly a matter of passions and emotion. Who could understand us without being one of us?”¹⁰⁴ When it came to most of the foreign press, he was right – they would continue to be plagued by a lack of understanding. However, over the next two years, Dorothy Thompson began to truly understand the Nazi movement, becoming one of the earliest and clearest voices against Hitler and his revolutionary threat against democracy. Perhaps her prescient insight about Hitler’s appeal and the Nazi movement can be explained because as woman in journalism she was more attuned to recognizing the power of emotion rather than reason – a trope that she would admit to throughout her

¹⁰² Kurt Georg Wilhelm Ludecke, *I Knew Hitler; the Story of a Nazi Who Escaped the Blood Purge* (New York: CScribner’s Sons, 1938), 531.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 531.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 532.

career. Unsurprisingly, her unique understanding and bold stance against Nazism made her foreign enemy number one after Hitler came to power.

CHAPTER 2: RISE TO PROMINENCE: BETWEEN GERMANY AND AMERICA, 1932-1934

An entire year after Thompson interviewed Hitler, Hans Kaltenborn, American radio commentator for CBS, also got the chance. Of this encounter he said, “After meeting Hitler I myself felt almost reassured...I could not see how a man of his type, a plebian Austrian of limited mentality, could ever gain the allegiance of a majority of Germans.”¹ Around this time Thompson had begun to realize the dire intellectual mistake that she and her fellow journalists had been making. Some reporters like Kaltenborn continued to remain blind, others insisted that fears about the Nazis were blown out of proportion and still others, like Dorothy Thompson, would soon admit their initial predictions were incorrect. Throughout 1932 and 1933, Thompson felt an urgent need to set the record straight.

In early 1932, she returned to the United States for a brief three months, and on February 16, she spoke to an audience of more than 600 at the Brooklyn Jewish Center. She told them that, like everyone else, she did not know the future of Germany, but “whatever will eventually emerge will be profoundly different from anything there now.”² Clearly her analysis was attracting attention in the United States, but Thompson could not stay put, the opportunity to witness the growing Nazi tide was too tempting. In June 1932,

¹ Nagorski, *Hitlerland*, 88.

² Newspaper clipping from 16 February 1932, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 folder, box 73, Articles About Dorothy Thompson 1914-1961, DT Papers.

she wrote to Rose Wilder Lane that she planned to go back to Europe for six to seven months at the end of August and this time her family would accompany her.³

Eyewitness Inside the German Inferno: 1932-1933

After Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor on January 30, 1933, the world watched and waited to see if he could be pacified by the conservatives. On January 31, reflecting the general opinion that the checks of democratic government would prevail, the *New York Times* reported that “it may be that we shall see the ‘tamed Hitler’... always we may look for some such transformation when a radical or a demagogue fights his way into responsible office.”⁴ This is just one example of many optimistic reports that once the Nazi leader solidified his rule and fixed the economic crisis, he would become a “moderate” and “respected” head of state.⁵ *The Christian Science Monitor*, perhaps the most conservative large American paper, reported that even though he came “in like a Lion” he would soon become “a lamb.”⁶ The tamed version that so many hoped for never materialized.

While back in Europe, Thompson was a first-hand witness to Hitler’s triumph. In an article titled “Try to Think,” she recalled the day after he was appointed Chancellor. She wrote that one day as a child her mother stood on the porch anticipating a storm rolling in. Thompson connected this memory to her feeling while standing at Grosse Stern in Berlin,

Something of my mother’s premonition in the face of that strange moving cloud rose in me... the day after Hitler became Chancellor, watching Storm Troopers pass by in an endless brown stream, stamping the pavement with their high brown boots,

³ Holtz, *Dorothy Thompson and Rose Wilder Lane*, 129.

⁴ Moshe R. Gottlieb, *American Anti-Nazi Resistance, 1933-1941: An Historical Analysis* (New York: Ktav PubHouse, 1982), 4.

⁵ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*

faces all fixed in one direction, chanting monotonously in harmony... “Judah Verrecke!” “Judah Verrecke!” Left, right, “Judah Verrecke!” - “Perish the Jews!” ... I felt a direct physical pain, like a hand reached into my body and twisting my heart, a strangling breathlessness, while a voice in my head, quite clearly and loud, “Something terrible has begun.”⁷

Thompson’s account of this day reveals her newfound understanding of Hitler’s power and vision for Germany. She wrote:

Not the slightest doubt was in my nerves...the marching would go on and on, not just along Unter den Linden, through the Tiergartenstrasse, over the Grosse Stern, on and away the distant Kaiserdamm; not over asphalt. No, on over borders past the green-uniformed frontier-guards, over the untidy little villages of Polish peasants, past the wayside cross of Austrian mountain roads, along the serene canals of Holland through the crowded red towns of the industrious Belgians, across the palaces of the City of Light, over mangled bodies of men, over the spattered hair of children, on and on.⁸

It occurred to her that the Nazi revolution had succeeded and that this moment had been building for quite some time. In direct acknowledgement of her initial misperceptions, Thompson wrote that the voice in her head then said, “‘Your world has slipped.’ Not the world – maybe this was the world; maybe my world was an illusion.”⁹ While others were still comforted by the belief that the Nazis would simmer down because they had made it into “responsible office,” Thompson was having a realization that Nazism and its appeal was deeper, darker, and much stronger than the democratic world that focused on politics of reason (the illusion) wanted to admit.

In the next month, Thompson continued to observe the rapid crumbling of democratic Germany. Thompson wrote to her husband saying she had been given “an

⁷ “Try to Think” article, M.S.S. General Articles T 5 folder, box 101, Manuscripts, DT Papers.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

unexpected assignment from a Jewish news agency for an up-to-the-minute report on ‘The German Inferno.’”¹⁰ Now living in Vienna, she travelled back to the German capital on the night of the Reichstag fire and stayed long enough to report on its aftermath. Hitler and the SA (*Sturmabteilung* or Assault Division), a paramilitary organization, had been given the opportunity to rampage legally with the suspension of free speech and press, and other civil liberties. At the time there were countless debates in the international press about atrocity tales coming from the new German government. The Nazis blamed the American and English Jews in the “subjugated liberal press” for spreading these lies.¹¹

Because of her recent re-evaluation of the Nazis seizure of power and the conflicting messages in the press, Thompson began to make it her mission to insist that the reports of terror and violence were not exaggerated. Privately Thompson let her husband know her thoughts. On March 13, just a few weeks after the Reichstag Fire Decree suspended basic civil liberties, Thompson wrote to Sinclair Lewis,

He is really as bad as the most sensational papers report. Hitler gets up and speaks about German unity and German loyalty and the new era, and the S.A. boys have simply turned into gangs, and beat up people on the streets ... and take socialists and communists, pacifists and Jews into so-called “Braune Etagen” where they are tortured. Italian fascism was a kindergarten compared to it. It’s an outbreak of sadistic and almost... pathological hatred.

She also told Lewis that she was shocked by many liberals “incredible...docility” in the face of what was happening around them.¹² She even stated she wanted to march around

¹⁰ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 184.

¹¹ Gottlieb, *American Anti-Nazi Resistance*, 15.

¹² Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Sinclair Lewis, 1933-1951 folder, box 48, outgoing correspondence, DT Papers.

Berlin reciting the Gettysburg Address at them. In her eyes, the country that she once admired for its cosmopolitan and liberal culture had disappeared overnight.

Further confirming her worst fears, Thompson witnessed the boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1. She learned of many unpleasant run-ins that friends had with SA men. For example, a friend in Munich, one of the most distinguished neurological physicians in the city, told her that “They had come to paste up in his window a yellow sign, to indicate that he was a Jew, and therefore to be avoided.”¹³ Soon after she sent a letter to a friend in London, the pianist Harriet Cohen. She told of the violence she had been witnessing since Hitler’s rise and how the “SA thugs had gone ‘perfectly mad’ as they hunted down new victims...‘they beat them with steel rods, knock their teeth out with revolver butts, break their arms... urinate on them, make them kneel and kiss the Hakenkreuz [the swastika].’”¹⁴ Thompson ended this letter saying, “If only someone would speak.” Over the next year, Thompson became that public voice.

Reporting on Nazism with a Focus on Jewish Persecution

In the Spring and Summer of 1933, the American public had a breadth of information about Hitler’s Germany available to it, yet many citizens were domestically focused on President Roosevelt’s initiatives to help combat the crippling force of the Great Depression.¹⁵ And, of those Americans who were paying close attention to the new regime, they were “rarely” seeing consistent news about Jewish persecution being an “inherent

¹³ Untitled article, Speeches: Jewish Question, box 103, DT Papers.

¹⁴ Nagorski, *Hitlerland*, 106-7.

¹⁵ Abzug, *America Views the Holocaust*, 8.

expression of Nazism.”¹⁶ Furthermore, news outlets reported on the German situation in a confusing manner. Many papers and magazines were convinced that the atrocity reports coming from foreign correspondents “could not be as bad” as they claimed.¹⁷ These conflicting narratives bred skepticism within the American public opinion of Nazi Germany.

At precisely the same time, the thoughts Thompson admitted privately began to make their way into her public articles. Thompson was one of a few prominent journalists trying to shed light on the danger posed by the Nazis. The condemnatory articles she wrote within the next year served as a main cause for her famed removal from Germany. Writing for both the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Jewish Telegraph Agency* as well as other Jewish news outlets, much of Thompson’s focus was placed on educating her audience about Nazi ideology and highlighting the treatment of Jews as instrumental to the Nazi program.

Through these articles and various speeches for Jewish American audiences, Thompson became an important ally for an increasingly nervous Jewish community, which did not want to attract negative attention in the United States. As a non-Jewish American, many thought that she would be seen as impartial and objective in her reporting about Nazism and Jewish persecution.¹⁸ Indeed, tension within the American Jewish community about how vocal and active they should be on behalf of their co-religionists and against Nazi Germany was an ongoing issue, especially since the Nazis blamed international Jewry for overacting and exaggerating their suffering. Although Jews in America enjoyed civil

¹⁶ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ Dorothy Thompson, “Force Governs Germany,” *Bnai Brith Messenger*, September 14, 1934, 4.

and political rights, many who were recent emigrants who fled from antisemitism in Eastern Europe, were well aware that they could easily be suspected of dual loyalty.¹⁹ Because of these fears, Dorothy Thompson was in a unique position to speak on their behalf.

The first article she wrote for her *Jewish Telegraph Agency* series “Hitler, the Menace,” was titled “The Brown Terror.” Thompson highlighted Nazi atrocities, specifically against Jews. In March, Ernst Hansftagengl, Hitler’s foreign press chief, and Hermann Goering had both attacked American news reports about Jew baiting, calling them lies.²⁰ In her article, Thompson harshly countered this claim by writing,

These statements of a responsible government to an American news agency were all lies. I can see no harm in saying this bluntly. Jews, quasi Jews have been violently mishandled... I have every reason to believe that it is a moderate statement, and well within the bounds of fact: Scores of people in Germany, Jews, Socialists, Communists... have died in Germany as a result of the Brown Terror. Hundreds, and perhaps thousands have suffered serious and extremely painful injuries. Tens of thousands have been thrown into prison or into concentration camps ... thousands more, and in particular thousands of Jews have been deprived of their means of existence.²¹

To further buttress her argument, Thompson then described one of her own missions to inquire about recent reasons for hospitalization. She went to a hospital “in the town of X... where I had reason to believe there were patients who had suffered from Nazi violence.”²² After receiving no answers from nurses and doctors, Thompson left the hospital. She was then approached by an assistant physician who had secretly followed her

¹⁹ Ami Zucker, "American Refugee Policy in the 1930s," in *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*, edited by Frank Caestecker and Bob Moore (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2010): 163.

²⁰ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 18.

²¹ “Brown Terror” article, M.S.S. general articles G 9 folder, box 98, DT Papers.

²² *Ibid.*

out. This man became an informant and reported that ever since Hitler's rise, patients would come in claiming that they were attacked by SA men. He then divulged that he was required to write on patients' admission reports that their injuries, or deaths, were the result of "an accident," not intentional and brutal beatings. The man also told Thompson that in his surgical ward alone fifteen Jews who had severe trauma from SA beatings had recently been treated, "their acts of provocation had sometimes consisted of bumping against a Brown Shirted S.A. man going into a restaurant door, or not immediately answering a [provocative] "Hail Hitler!"²³ Thompson also told her readers that in Berlin alone a conservative total of at least 370 cases of mishandlings and assaults already existed. Thompson's insistent account of routinized violence by the Nazi party, and the particular targeted danger for Jews in Germany, reflects her early journalistic courage to inform the American public of what was actually happening. Knowing that doubt was widespread, she did not want to let ambiguity triumph over truth.

At the same time that Thompson was writing for JTA, she also produced articles for the *Saturday Evening Post*, which reached a wider American audience. Many of these articles, such as "Back to Blood and Iron," attempted to explain how the Nazi revolution had come about as well as to analyze the spirit of the movement and its policy. In this way Thompson not only reported on what was happening on the streets of Germany, but also what had happened to the minds of many citizens. In an article titled "Room to Breathe In," Thompson further explained Nazi ideology by looking at the policy of *Gleichschaltung*, or the "bringing into line" of the entire state under Nazi influence.²⁴ She

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Room to Breathe In" article, 24 June 1933, M.S.S. general articles G 9 folder, box 98, DT Papers.

made sure to tell American readers that at the root of the ideology was “the maintenance of a pure race,”²⁵ and that therefore, “the Jews, alone, are not to be brought into line,” rather they “are to be treated as guests, as aliens with restricted rights.”²⁶ This type of reporting on the centrality of racial antisemitism was absent from many other American correspondents’ analyses of Nazi policy. For other reporters, German antisemitism was commonly attributed to Hitler’s wish to divert attention from domestic problems, an attempt to unify the German people, a reflection of dissatisfaction with the Versailles Treaty, and even blaming the victims for their own position in Hitler’s Germany.²⁷ Failing to grasp the role of racial ideology in the Third Reich further created a confused message from the American press. Thompson’s accuracy made her an outlier in accurate understanding and interpretation.

Indeed, Thompson continued to expose the racial worldview of Nazism and to make this danger clear to the American people; she was also the first person to frame this ideology as the complete antithetical threat to western democracy.²⁸ In her article “Germany is a Prison,” Thompson outlined the Nazi worldview as biological. She wrote that the Nazis view life “in racial characteristics and inheritances, that the German people are Aryans, and that no non-Aryans can, or should, be included in the brotherhood of the new order, the persecution of Jews is directed at removing them altogether from Germany. In this it differs from the other forms of persecution, in that it regards the victims as -- and

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 42-43.

²⁸ Ethan Mordden, *The Guest List: How Manhattan Defined American Sophistication: From the Algonquin Round Table to Truman Capote’s Ball* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010), 146.

for no fault of his own -- incorrigible.”²⁹ From very early on she took seriously the Nazis stated goals about removing the Jewish “parasite” from the body of the Volk. She also exposed the Nazi world outlook as disdaining “the whole principle of equality” as a heritage of the French Revolution, instead glorifying false biological fact that discerns vast inequalities between men.³⁰ In “Hitler and the American Jew” Thompson and Benjamin Stolberg, explained how this worldview was in direct competition with American ideas; Hitlerism was “an assault on the twentieth century... nothing gives us this curious feeling of the *cultural* regression in Hitlerism as significantly as its irrationally unmodern Judeophobia.”³¹ Specifically, they pointed out that the United States should have a “natural aversion to the whole nonsensical racial theory of the Nazis... if it be true, as Hitler insists, that a nation can consist only of blood brothers like an Indian tribe, then our whole American history is just one long folly. To be sure, we have our own race problem. And, like every other great Society, we have suffered from innumerable know-nothing movements. But at least our bigotries have no official sanction. If race prejudice be unleashed on an even larger scale than already plagues the world, no country would suffer graver consequences than America, which has been built on exactly the opposite theory.”³²

Of course, these statements were rather idealistic and not at all how American history had played out on the ground. However, Thompson’s comments were disingenuous to prove her broader point of American superiority, setting up the ideological war between

²⁹ Dorothy Thompson, “Germany is a Prison,” in *Opinion: A Journal of Jewish Life and Letters*, Volume IV. Number 5, (March 1934), 16.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 14.

³¹ Dorothy Thompson and Benjamin Stolberg, “Hitler and the American Jew,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, vol. 94, (1933), 130 - 145.

³² *Ibid*, 137.

the professed ideals of western democracy and the new Nazi worldview which many could not fathom. The article also emphasized the “Americanness” of Jews by saying they are against Hitler for much more than his anti-Jewish program. They are also “for democracy. They are for civil rights. They are against war. They dislike militarism... In all this they are at one with the vast majority of the American people and with the best traditions of this country. It was the Jewish masses who demonstrated for all of *us*, partly because Hitler attacked the Jews directly, but also because they have more closely in their own background the memory of what it is to live under tyranny.”³³ By focusing on how the Nazi worldview was threatening to democratic ideals and highlighting the issue of antisemitism, Thompson stood out as a seething critic of Hitler and began gaining notoriety in the United States – and among Nazi officials.

In May 1933, Thompson returned to the United States for the summer and found New York “agog over her.”³⁴ Her commentary on the current atmosphere in Germany and Austria was ominous at best, saying it “had gotten so poisonous that it even drifted through closed doors into one’s writing room, like a poison gas.”³⁵ Articles describing her recent commentary on Germany flooded American newspapers, reporting that she saw Hitler’s government as a “rule of fear,” and that the fate of the Jews was “ghastly” and no one even knows the “extent to which they have suffered.”³⁶ On May 12, the *New York Times* quoted Thompson as saying she still believes Hitler to be a “little man,” yet that “he is really a

³³ Ibid, 140.

³⁴ “Dorothy Thompson, Safe from Nazis, Is Home to Find City Agog over Her - May 14, 1933,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, May 14, 1933.

³⁵ Dorothy Thompson Diary 1933, 1931-1932, 1935-1936 folder, subject file, box 59, DT Papers.

³⁶ Newspapers Clippings, “Hitler’s Regime Flayed by Miss Sinclair Lewis,” box 73, 1933-1934 folder, DT Papers.

great demagogue who believes in all this stuff...He is in himself the acme of the revolution of the declassé.”³⁷

Upon her return home, Thompson also began to lecture again. On May 15 she spoke at a reception for the JTA with one-hundred and fifty prominent Jewish and non-Jewish leaders in attendance. She told her audience, “I think what is happening in Germany is a revolt against culture, against civilization itself, and that it affects Jews in the first line is one thing. But it affects everybody.”³⁸ Reports and speeches such as these show that Thompson was working hard to inform the American people that this new fascist force was the antithesis of the democratic world and therefore, it should not just be viewed as a “Jewish problem.”

Thompson’s critical commentary throughout the summer facilitated “her personal anti-Hitler educational campaign.”³⁹ In late July she told a Burlington, Vermont audience that “only through knowledge of German social and political history is it possible to understand the present upheaval.”⁴⁰ Again admitting that she and others were sorely mistaken about the fascist appeal she said, “Never in the world did I think that Hitler would carry out his program... because it didn’t make sense. But now I realize that whether or not a thing makes sense is no test of its validity.”⁴¹ Because of Hitler’s successful revolution

³⁷ “HITLER POWER SEEN IN MIDDLE CLASS: Dorothy Thompson, Back From Germany, Calls Him ‘Apothe- Osis of the Little Man.’ REVOLT AGAINST CULTURE’ Aristocracy and Intellectuals Are Ignored In ‘Fantastic’ Nazi Revolution, Writer Finds.,” *New York Times*, 12 May 1933.

³⁸ “Dorothy Thompson Tells How Nazi Revolt Began, in Plaza Hotel Talk Here - May 15, 1933,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, May 15, 1933.

³⁹ “Miss Thompson Explains Menace of Hitler Regime to Burlington Audience “ *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 24, 1933.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

and ensuing terror, Thompson continued to inform her audiences that what was happening in Germany was a direct revolt against civilized culture and American ideals.

Expulsion from Germany

Ironically, what grabbed the attention of the general American public best was not necessarily Dorothy Thompson's persistent writings about Nazi ideology and Jewish sufferings, but rather her own expulsion from Germany. Between the time the Nazis gained power and her expulsion in August 1934, she had visited Germany on five separate occasions without trouble from the authorities.⁴² For most of 1934 Thompson had remained in Vermont to write in seclusion, but in July she once again returned to Europe to gather new material for another series of articles. However, because of her first series of anti-Hitler articles and her critiques of Nazi antisemitism, a "Dorothy Thompson Emergency Squad" was established to rush translations of every word she wrote so the government would be aware of what she was reporting to the "outside" world. This type of tracking soon enabled the Nazi party to oust their number one foreign enemy for speaking ill of the Fuehrer and his government.⁴³ In Hitler's Germany, there was no real policy for treatment of foreign correspondents.⁴⁴ As before, the goal was to win them over and with the difficult ones that continued to criticize, they could now make an example of them.⁴⁵ The natural starting point was with Dorothy Thompson – who was about to re-enter the country.

⁴² Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 249.

⁴³ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 202.

⁴⁴ Ludecke, *I Knew Hitler*, 614.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

In mid-July 1934, Thompson began her research tour in Austria to look into the death of Chancellor Dollfuss and witness local Nazi demonstrations. From there she rented a car and drove towards Berlin, stopping in towns and villages along the way to test the popular mood. She noted that all houses flew Nazi flags and election banners reminded citizens to affirm Hitler's power grab following Hindenburg's recent death.⁴⁶ Once in Berlin, Thompson checked into the Adlon Hotel and was immediately warned by friends "not to use the hotel phones, since they were monitored."⁴⁷ She proceeded to find a cheap bar with a phone booth and placed calls to old German acquaintances. After interviewing some former friends who now supported the Nazi party, Thompson remarked that it was as if "they had forgotten that there ever had been such thing as law."⁴⁸

On August 24, ten days into her Berlin research, Thompson called up the American Ambassador to Germany, William E. Dodd and described her plans to "study and describe the present German socio-philosophical system."⁴⁹ A little while after this conversation, Thompson was visited by a young man from the Gestapo. The man stated,

It is come to our attention that you are again in Germany. In view of the many hostile articles which you wrote and which appeared in the American press we feel it incompatible with our self-respect to permit you to remain longer in Germany... we ask you to break short your visit and leave Germany immediately.⁵⁰

Dodd must have been surprised to receive another call from Thompson that afternoon. This time she was shaken, telling Dodd about her visit from the Gestapo officer and his request

⁴⁶ Nagorski, *Hitlerland*, 164.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 165.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 166.

⁴⁹ William E. Dodd, *Ambassador Dodd's Diary, 1933-1938* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1941), 155.

⁵⁰ "Miss Thompson Not Resentful," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 16, 1934.

that she leave the country immediately.⁵¹ Following this announcement, Dodd launched a quick investigation. His office was told that Thompson's removal was primarily due to her Hitler interview in 1931 and scathing 1933 articles. Hitler's pride might also have been an issue. According to historian Volker Ullrich, he had a problem with women his own age who were self-confident and educated enough to see through his "charming but artificial poses." His encounter with Thompson therefore "stirred feelings of inferiority" and her subsequent articles instilled a fear of her accurate reporting that likely led to this act of revenge.⁵² Indeed, Dodd was informed that an appeal was not possible because it had come from the "highest authority in the Reich."⁵³ Thompson complied with the order and left for Paris the next day. At the train station a group of American and British reporters came to see Thompson off, giving roses to the first foreign correspondent expelled from Nazi Germany.

Although this development meant that Thompson could no longer directly gather material for her articles, Dodd observed in his diary, "whether Mrs. Lewis had given cause or not, her expulsion from Germany would advertise everything she had said all over the democratic world."⁵⁴ This proved true and, much to the displeasure of Nazi officials, the expulsion of Dorothy Thompson became front page news in America, helping her gain fame rather than punishing her. Although the foreign press was threatened by Hitler's government and other correspondents felt pressure to leave or restrain their reports, she was the first American ousted by direct decree and it worked to her favor. As Ernst

⁵¹ Dodd, *Ambassador Dodd's Diary*, 156.

⁵² Volker Ullrich, *Hitler: Ascent, 1889-1939* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 273.

⁵³ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 198.

⁵⁴ Dodd, *Ambassador Dodd's Diary*, 156.

Hanfstaengl described in his memoir, Hitler thought that threatening foreign correspondents with sanctions or expulsion would bring them to heel; the opposite rang true when it came to Dorothy Thompson.⁵⁵ When her husband was informed of this event, he made a statement that reflects Thompson's independence and unwavering critical voice against Nazism,

Well, what do you expect me to do about it? After all, Dorothy has covered seven revolutions, so she ought to be able to take care of herself. She's no poor, weak, little woman who needs my help... Possibly the Germans felt they had to put her out to save their dignity.⁵⁶

On August 26th the front page of the *New York Times* covered the international drama. The headlines proclaimed, “Dorothy Thompson Expelled by Reich for ‘Slur’ on Hitler: Dorothy Thompson Tells of Nazi Ban’ and ‘Punished for 1931 Article’ due to condemning ‘modern anti-Semitism.’”⁵⁷ Her expulsion was unheard of in Western Europe and it was a “sensational, unprecedented development in international affairs” which “caused a great deal of excitement and anxiety” within other countries.⁵⁸

In her own account of the incident Thompson tried to make statements that took the focus off of herself and place it instead onto the terrible force of Nazism, which she attacked with renewed vigor. Supposedly, Hitler “never comprehended” that journalists could carry on with denunciations perfectly well in any other country.⁵⁹ Ironically, precisely because of the platform her expulsion had provided, Thompson had no trouble

⁵⁵ Hanfstaengl, *Unheard Witness*, 233.

⁵⁶ Newspaper clipping, “Wife Able to Take Care of Herself, Asserts Lewis” by Dorothy Roe, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 1 folder, box 73, DT Papers.

⁵⁷ “Dorothy Thompson Tells of Nazis Ban,” *New York Times*, Monday 27 August 1934, 1933-1934 folder, box 73, DT Papers.

⁵⁸ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 202.

⁵⁹ Hanfstaengl, *Unheard Witness*, 233.

continuing her crusade against Nazism from afar. Indeed, Ludecke wrote that the “Dorothy Thompson affair” has been handled with “devastating stupidity.”⁶⁰ Apparently he had pointed out to Hitler that she, as a publicist, and her husband, as one of the foremost American novelists, exercised considerable influence on American public opinion.⁶¹ This warning was clearly ignored and from abroad Thompson “continued to be the most telling critic of Nazi Germany among American Journalists.”⁶² According to James G. McDonald, a friend and key figure in Thompson’s future anti-Nazi and pro-refugee crusade, who had a lunch with Thompson upon her reentry to the states, she herself “denied that she was jubilant at being expelled from Germany, but evidently she was not depressed.”⁶³

Thompson knew that the expulsion had thrust her further into the spotlight and that she had plenty of reliable contacts still in Germany and on the European continent. She continued her mission to remind the American people that the entire democratic way of life was under siege. Speaking out after the expulsion, Thompson specifically focused on the Nazis’ actions against the freedom of the press. She said: “My expulsion from Germany is not individually of any importance, it is only interesting in so far as it throws some light upon the position of foreign correspondence in Germany. The German government has always taken the position that the foreign correspondent enjoys the same privileges he enjoys there as he does in any civilized country and the same degree of freedom, that this is not so has been illustrated by a number of incidents that have occurred over the last 18

⁶⁰ Ludecke, *I Knew Hitler*, 616-17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ James G. McDonald, *Advocate for the Doomed*. Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart, and Severin Hochberg eds., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 465.

months.”⁶⁴ She discussed incidents when the Nazis threatened journalists who were not complying with what they wanted reported. Thompson also made it clear that, “National Socialism... is a world outlook frankly directed against the liberal democratic system.”⁶⁵

In a cable report she noted that,

My offense was to think that Hitler is just an ordinary man...That is a crime against the reigning cult in Germany...To question this mystic mission is so heinous that, if you are German you can be sent to jail. I, fortunately, am an American, so I merely was sent to Paris. Worse things can happen to one.⁶⁶

With commentary like this she tried to insist that worse things, more important than her own exile, were brewing in Germany.

She also used the extensive press attention to highlight the worsening plight of German Jews. Thompson commented that of all her writings that triggered expulsion she believed that the articles written for the JTA were particularly abhorrent to the Nazi leaders because she was not Jewish herself, she was speaking for the Jewish cause, and she was spreading this information to the non-Jewish community. With this comment Thompson suggested that the non-Jewish public should care about Jewish persecution, an argument she would soon frequently echo. In the same press statement Thompson warned that “the position of the Jews in Germany was positively hopeless” and that many were already trying to emigrate out of the present conditions.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Number 2002.547.1, Film ID 2574, RG-60.3497, Dorothy Thompson speaks out after being expelled from Germany, Moving Image Research Collections, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC [Hereafter USHMM].

⁶⁵ Newspaper clipping by Arno Dosch-Fleurot on 26 August 1934, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 1 folder, box, 73, DT Papers.

⁶⁶ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 198.

⁶⁷ “DOROTHY THOMPSON HOME FROM BERLIN: Writer Expelled From Germany Lays Financial Plight to Hitler’s Extravagance. HEARD MANY COMPLAINTS People Quieted by Propaganda on Foreign Hatred, She Says -- Jews’ Role ‘Hopeless.’” *New York Times*, 1934, sec. sports.

In one article written after her homecoming, Thompson debuted an argument that she would utilize extensively throughout the rest of her fight against Nazism. She found a balance between reporting on the specific issues facing German Jews and telling the American people that they all, Jewish or not, should be concerned because “no individual and no group of individuals have any protection against the decision vagaries of the autocratic state in Germany.”⁶⁸ This “universalization” has been characterized by some historians as detracting from and confusing the specificity of Jewish suffering.⁶⁹ However, Thompson took care to always explain why the Jewish plight was distinct, warranted special attention, and what implications these threats had for a democratic society as a whole. Part of the importance for Thompson to point out the Jewish plight while also making it universally relatable was due to her role as an important non-Jewish spokesperson. She could highlight Jewish sufferings in a way that could make the general public care. Many of her writings contained the following theme:

the persecution of the Jews is directed at removing them altogether from Germany. In this it differs from the other forms of persecution, in that it regards the victims as – and for no fault of his own – incorrigible... it is the aim to eliminate the Jews.⁷⁰

Much of Thompson’s post 1934 reporting, and personal concern, was on what she called the “cold pogrom,” the increasing pressure and policy aims directed to entice Jews to emigrate from Germany. As Thompson’s regular visibility as an American journalist increased, her writings to inform the American public about the Jewish plight and

⁶⁸ “The Persecution of the Individual and Minorities in Nazi Germany” article, page 11, M.S.S. General articles P 5 folder, box 100, DT Papers.

⁶⁹ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*.

⁷⁰ “The Persecution of the Individual and Minorities in Nazi Germany” article, page 13, M.S.S. General articles P 5 folder, box 100, DT Papers.

impending refugee crisis would take a turn toward humanitarian responsibility and activism.

Roots of Humanitarian Activism

As shown through many of her early articles, Dorothy Thompson's deep concern about the "German Inferno" was driven by her personal experiences and connections in Germany and Europe. The roots of her activist initiatives can be seen in the first stages of the Nazi takeover. For example, as early as June 1933 she was contacted by acquaintances seeking help with their exit from Germany. Heinrich Kranz, a playwright, found Thompson's name because she was well connected in New York. He sought her advice on any organizations in the United States that were helping needy Jewish writers emigrate from Germany.⁷¹ Similarly, a month later she was contacted by Ernst Rowohlt, a German publisher, writing on behalf of his friend and lawyer Dr. Hermann Finkelstein. He wrote,

Due to the circumstances known to you, it is no longer possible for him to work in Germany as a lawyer. Mr. Finkelstein is literarily very educated and I hope that he will succeed in realizing his plans. In any case, I would be very grateful if you or your spouse could possibly assist him with words and deeds.⁷²

These early requests for assistance show that Thompson, likely because of her well-known anti-Nazi sympathies, various Jewish connections, and growing fame, was on the mind of many who were seeking emigration for themselves or someone known to them.

Further, much of Thompson's compelling information, especially after her expulsion, came from friends who still resided in Germany and Austria. In one instance,

⁷¹ Letter to Dorothy Thompson from John Gunther, 12 June 1933, Cha-Col Feb 1939 - Nov 1957 (letter misfiled), box 6, incoming correspondence, DT Papers.

⁷² Letter from Ernst Rowohlt, 12 July 1933, Rid-Rut folder, box 24, incoming correspondence, DT Papers.

Eugenie Schwarzwald, the well-known pedagogue and close friend to Thompson, wrote in January 1934 to inform her of some tragic news:

As you may guess, the death of Jacob Wasserman [German-Jewish writer] has depressed me utterly... he died – of the fact that he was a German and a Jew. The doctors talk of angina pectoris because it is thought sentimental to say that men die of broken hearts. But Wasserman's heart survived just one year of the Hitler regime. He could not deny that he was a Jew. He could not live without being a German.⁷³

The personal sufferings of many under the Nazi regime were not just reporting material for Thompson, they were the life stories of her dear friends. Her many connections around Germany and Austria allowed for an intimate knowledge of ostracism and persecution which certainly influenced Thompson's drive for humanitarian activism to aid refugees in the coming years.

⁷³ Letter to Dorothy Thompson from Eugenie Schwarzwald, 7 January 1934, Schwarzwald, Eugenie folder, box 27, incoming correspondence, DT Papers.

CHAPTER 3: A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING AND THE FORMATION OF A “PERSONAL BRAIN TRUST,” 1935-1937

After returning to the US, Dorothy Thompson’s career proliferated and she became known as the “First Lady of American Journalism.”¹ From 1935 onwards she was center stage in the American press world and she became exactly what she had hoped for – a high profile newspaper woman turned celebrity, something that Americans had never seen before.² She received her own syndicated column in an important newspaper, gave weekly radio broadcasts, cultivated a diverse readership, and continued to lecture around the country and write books. Thompson’s early reporting on the Third Reich and the Jewish plight continued through public commentary and warnings to the American people. She was skilled at trying to convert her audience to her viewpoint; “She would inform you of what you didn’t know, remind you of what you did know, then warn that ignoring evil is condoning evil.”³ In this period she also became a beacon of political and humanitarian activism. Not only did she wish for Americans to understand Nazism through her public platform; using her growing prestige and influence, she began creating a dialogue about taking action against it. To many Jewish and liberal leaning Americans, she became a role model in her anti-Nazi and pro-refugee efforts. Thompson personally aided refugees and defended democratic ideals through a variety of humanitarian initiatives – she performed

¹ Untitled article clipping, 10 December 1937, *New York Herald Tribune*, 1936-1937 folder, box 73, DT Papers.

² Mordden, *The Guest List*, 141.

³ *Ibid*, 145.

individual activism while also setting up her own “salon” where she garnered support for initiatives by influencing important figures in her social circles.

In contrast to Thompson’s continuous outspoken criticism of the Third Reich and the Jewish plight stood the general American atmosphere of the 1930s. In these years the media’s confusion, skepticism, and restraint about German reports only grew. The memory of false horror stories and propaganda from World War I made most Americans distrustful of the press when it came to this issue, believing that what happened in Europe this time could not be as bad as what was reported.⁴ Furthermore, in the White House, FDR was being pulled in multiple directions to hold together his democratic coalition and often chose to focus domestically. Lastly, the sentiment from the American masses remained anti-immigrant, antisemitic, and pro-isolation. It was in this environment that Thompson forged ahead, torch in hand, with a mission to remind the American public of its supposed obligation to welcome the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”⁵

Restraint and Misunderstanding: The Atmosphere of the Press

In the American press, reports about Germany continued to be “balanced, reserved, and tended toward moderation,” cultivating a false sense of understanding among the American public.⁶ Many foreign correspondents feared being expelled from the country like Thompson had been. For most, “expulsion was not a badge of honor” because they worried about retaliation from their newspapers and feared that their careers would suffer.⁷

⁴ Smith, *Age of Fear*, 137.

⁵ Foundation, “The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus.”

⁶ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 20.

⁷ *Ibid*, 23.

Because of this, many correspondents treaded carefully. Further, Hitler's public rants about a worldwide Jewish conspiracy of international bankers and media moguls struck a chord of fear in some mainstream Jewish published news organizations, implicating and impugning their coverage.⁸ The best example is the Sulzberger family of the *New York Times*, who may have feared criticism from their readers if the paper appeared "too sympathetic" to the German Jewish plight.⁹

Similarly, some individual Jewish journalists seemed to take moderate or even conservative views on the German situation. Some have argued that Walter Lippmann, who was considered the most influential columnist by many Americans, voiced the idea that Nazi antisemitism was somehow triggered by Jews themselves.¹⁰ Writing a thrice weekly syndicated column for the *New York Herald Tribune*, he urged his readers to hold a restrained view of the Third Reich and its legal actions against Jews. An April 1938 poll reflects similar sentiments in the general population. Americans were asked if they agreed that the persecution of European Jews was either entirely or partially their own fault, and sixty percent said yes.¹¹

In September 1935, when the Nuremberg Laws officially disenfranchised and classified Jews as non-citizens in Germany, the majority of the American press still failed to grasp the centrality of Nazi racial policy. Some papers such as the *Los Angeles Times* even reported that "the laws did not entail any real change for the Jews' situation."¹² In the

⁸ Leff, *Buried by the Times*, 21.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 45.

¹¹ Ibid, 47.

¹² Ibid, 62.

years between Dorothy Thompson's exile from Germany and the orchestrated terror of *Kristallnacht* in 1938, it is evident that most of the American press continued to be optimistic and restrained toward the actions of the Third Reich against the Jews, making Thompson's emerging mission even more exemplary.

Thompson's Fame: Reception Upon Return to U.S.

At the end of 1934, Thompson's expulsion allowed her to attain a new level of journalistic status and celebrity stardom in the United States. Reporters rushed to get her opinion on the country she was forced to leave behind. She told many of them that "Germany had gone to war already and the rest of the world does not believe it."¹³ Because of this new attention, Thompson began traveling the United States spreading news of European affairs with a steady stream of lectures with titles such as "The Crisis in Germany" and "This World Peace Problem."¹⁴

One common theme that Thompson emphasized was how to understand the twisted meanings of National Socialist ideology, specifically racial ideology. In one speech she discussed how some people have suggested that,

The [Nazi worldview] can only be comprehended by those who are able to think with them blood, provided that it is German blood. Now on my own blood, although it is, as far as I know -- and that's as far as most people do -- impeccably Aryan,¹⁵ is certainly not German, and anyhow, I don't know what it means to think with one's blood, although I have long suspected that it means to think with one's prejudices... I have an overwhelming prejudice against cruelty and oppression.¹⁶

¹³ Nagorski, *Hitlerland*, 168.

¹⁴ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 199.

¹⁵ In these years Thompson received numerous letters from antisemitic Americans complaining that she herself had "Jewish blood," attempting to discount her credibility and belittle her concerns for German Jews.

¹⁶ Untitled speech, Speeches: National Socialism folder, box 104, DT papers.

Thompson knew how to point out the flawed logic that she hoped Americans would grasp. As this quote demonstrates, she was also able to communicate in a way that was engaging, personal, and relatable, aiding her influence even more.

In a Syracuse lecture, she received glowing praise from the local press: “For one cannot help listening to Dorothy Thompson. In a beautifully modulated voice, she speaks earnestly and with fire, now and then giving her sentences a humorous turn.”¹⁷ Speaking to her universal appeal and ability to break down gender barriers, Professor Kenneth Bartlett of the School of Speech commented that Thompson, “is really wonderful. She knows her stuff better than any man I have ever talked with.”¹⁸ Over the next year, Thompson continued to draw impressive audiences of over 2,000 with Jewish and non-Jewish members.¹⁹ From 1934 on, Thompson truly became one of the loudest and most respected voices to inform the American public about the Nazi threat.

It was during this year of lecturing that Thompson was invited to speak at the New York Herald Tribune Conference on October 4, 1934. Helen Reid, a fierce suffragist and wife of the newspaper’s publisher Ogden Reid, was so thoroughly impressed by Thompson’s writing and speaking that she wanted her to join the paper. She approached her husband with the proposition that Thompson could be the female “counterpoint” to Walter Lippmann who was not as adamantly against the Nazis as early as she was.²⁰

¹⁷ “A Writer Speaks on Germany,” by Amy Lee, Syracuse University Alumni News, January 1935, volume XVI, Number 4, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 1 folder, box 73, DT papers.

¹⁸ Newspaper clipping from 19 December 1934, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1914, 1929, 1930, 1932-1935 1 folder, box 73, DT papers.

¹⁹ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 206.

²⁰ Richard Kluger and Phyllis Kluger, *The Paper: The Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 287.

Because Helen Reid recognized Thompson's magnetism and admired her crusade against Nazism, Thompson was offered one of the highest journalistic platforms; a regular column.²¹ Starting in 1935, Thompson was given a thrice-weekly news column in the *New York Herald Tribune*, on the front page of the second section, which she called, "On the Record."

Before this breakthrough, regular columnist jobs were occupied by an all-male monopoly. Thompson was receiving a coveted platform only held by the most distinguished figures in the nation's public life, giving her an exceptional and prominent outlet to voice her concerns and plead for action. Thompson's column alternated the days of the week with Walter Lippmann's column. Lippman, a classic liberal, insisted that a journalist must be detached and do nothing more than report facts. He also often criticized the public's ability to understand much of anything.²² On the contrary, Thompson offered a fresh and emotional perspective, not only believing in the public's ability to understand complex political and social analysis, but also imploring that they use the information and education that journalists provided to make decisions and take action. As one can imagine, the contrast between Lippman and Thompson may have created a bizarre experience for American readers. Monday, Wednesday, Friday they read a respected Jewish columnist's pleadings for understanding about Nazi sentiment, while Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday they read a popular new gentile's argument for urgent American action against Jewish persecution.

²¹ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 203.

²² Covert and Stevens, *Mass Media between the Wars*, 128.

The column for the *New York Herald Tribune* gave her a particularly diverse audience of readers. The *Tribune* was the most prominent and well-respected conservative newspaper in the country, appearing in more than 130 cities.²³ This gave Thompson a wide range of readers who may not have otherwise been exposed to “liberal” opinions on the Nazi regime and the treatment of the Jews. Another important aspect of Thompson’s column was that it appealed to both men and women. With this exposure she became known as the “Woman Who Tells Men What to Think.”²⁴ Reports stated that “men read her as much as women, men discuss her opinions as often as do women, men look forward to her tomorrow’s comment on today’s news – as frequently as women. Men ask her to address exclusive meetings.”²⁵ The notion that Thompson’s journalism was novel because she was a woman is notable because contemporaries were not commenting on male journalists in the same manner. Thompson’s breakthrough in the field was truly a new phenomenon, especially since she forced herself into covering “serious” news previously reserved for male engagement, and beyond this, men were willing to read her articles, debate with her, and in many cases, be guided by her opinion – this was new territory in the world of journalism.

At the time she began her column it was no secret that European affairs were not the burning issue for *Herald Tribune* readers. Most of them “would rather focus on preventing Roosevelt’s reelection.”²⁶ Yet, Thompson offered a unique view on issues that were not normally covered, and within a few months her volume of mail – over a hundred

²³ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 225.

²⁴ Mordden, *The Guest List*, 141.

²⁵ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 223.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 217.

letters per day – both positive and negative, showed that her column was “becoming a fixture at many American breakfast tables.”²⁷ By the end of the year, Thompson proved that she deserved the distinguished columnist position; she had an estimated 7.5 million readers from across the country, her column appearing in every city or town of any size.²⁸ One newspaper article about Thompson’s success even noted, “It’s getting to be more or less a form of greeting three times a week in pretty much all sections of the country: ‘Did you read Dorothy Thompson this morning?’”²⁹ Thompson’s stardom even eclipsed her husband’s. Sinclair Lewis was known to his readers and in the literary world, but Thompson was becoming known to a much wider audience; mail carriers, grocery clerks, taxi drivers, and hairdressers quoted her with familiarity from day to day.³⁰

Public Commentary

By 1936, Thompson was well known as a columnist, radio commentator, and lecturer.³¹ She wrote for multiple publications including, but not limited to, the *New York Herald Tribune*, *New York Post*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Foreign Affairs*. The source of her power was both the size of her following and its diversity. Continuing her role as a key figure who spoke on behalf of her Jewish friends in Europe and in the United States, Thompson was regularly featured in Jewish news outlets and her strong stance against Hitler was celebrated. She was often referred to as the

²⁷ Ibid, 218 and Ware, *Letter to the World*, 46.

²⁸ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 223.

²⁹ “Reflections of a News Columnist” Editor’s note from October 1936, Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1936-1937 2 folder, box 73, DT papers.

³⁰ Ware, *Letter to the World*, 46.

³¹ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 199.

“outstanding woman journalist” who as a “non-Jewish woman” takes a “courageous stand” against the tyrannical methods of Hitler.³² Her preoccupation with the evils of Nazism and her concern for its victims endeared her to Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike. Thompson’s column, “On the Record,” reached the largest audience among early anti-Nazi reporters.³³ In these years she informed and stirred a wide range of readers with a personal and moral mission to educate and spur action against Nazism and for refugees.

Throughout 1935 Thompson turned out countless articles on the problem of Nazism, including the racial rhetoric of “new” antisemitism. With her many publications she became an interpreter rather than a reporter of events, allowing her to influence and sway public opinion.³⁴ Vincent Sheean, Thompson’s close friend and American journalist and novelist, wrote, “She rose with meteoric suddenness into the position of an American oracle, one of those very few who have the corporate, general permission to tell people what to think.”³⁵ Instead of just reporting the facts, Thompson used her prominent position to try to convince the public to take action. Her writings explained Nazi policies and modern antisemitism to the American public and offered suggestions for what America should do.

In a 1935 *Foreign Affairs* article that she titled “National Socialism: Theory and Practice,” Thompson dissected the racially based antisemitism and the theory of “parasitic” Jews. She also explained how the Nazis were presenting both the problems of capitalism

³² Dorothy Thompson, “Force Governs Germany,” *Bnai Brith Messenger*, Friday, September 14, 1934; Page: 4.

³³ Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, 52.

³⁴ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 204.

³⁵ Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 254.

and socialism as “Jewish problems,” revealing the inherent paradoxes within the Nazi worldview.³⁶ In her second *Foreign Affairs* article, called “Culture Under the Nazis” she stated,

Of course, the flight abroad of German artists, writers and scientists has been prodigious. The roster of their names reads like pages torn from a German "Who's Who." Most of them, to be sure, are not classed as Germans in the Third Reich, because they have non-Aryan blood in their veins.³⁷

Thompson discussed the hundreds of “non-Aryans” who were being forced to leave their professions: university professors, actors, musicians, composers, artists, architects, writers, and on and on. She noted that this exile “leaves an immense gap in German cultural life.”³⁸ Writings such as these established Thompson’s deep concern for German Jews who were getting pushed out of their livelihoods, many of whom were forced to consider emigration. Understanding that the United States possessed its own domestic antisemitism and was decidedly anti-immigration, Thompson latched onto this issue as one direction for her activism.

Thompson’s First Activist Initiatives: Political and Humanitarian

At the same time that Thompson was receiving significant attention across the country, most of the mainstream press continued to downplay the situation for German Jews. The *New York Times* and other media outlets maintained that the persecution and subsequent refugee problem was a Jewish issue to solve.³⁹ Thompson worked tirelessly to

³⁶ Dorothy Thompson, “National Socialism: Theory and Practice,” *Foreign Affairs* 13 (1935): 557–73.

³⁷ Dorothy Thompson, “Culture under the Nazis,” *Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1936): 414.

³⁸ Thompson, “Culture under the Nazis.”

³⁹ Leff, *Buried by the Times*, 33.

offer an alternative viewpoint. She focused on reminding the American people about the inherent threat that Nazism posed to the entire western world and because of this argued that Americans needed to start “organizing rescue operations for European refugees.”⁴⁰ These ideas evolved into two categories of action for Thompson, one political and one humanitarian.

For the most part, in the years between 1934 and 1938, the American government was not actively involved in finding solutions to Hitler’s dictatorship and it was not particularly concerned with aiding the position of German Jews. To combat this, Thompson began to engage in a dialogue about the United States’ position of power in the world. One way that Dorothy Thompson sought to get the American public interested in fighting the international threat of Nazism was to directly relate it to domestic issues. Thompson’s September 1, 1936, “On the Record” article exemplifies how she wrote about Nazism as a force to reckon with even inside the United States. She said,

From Germany emanates constantly a stream of propaganda which permeates every country, including our own, to the effect that all radical tendencies, with which are lumped all forms of liberalism, emanate from the Jews and that the only way of preserving nationalism is to preserve it along Nazi lines.⁴¹

Countering this nationalistic approach, Thompson suggested that Americans needed to actively preserve and defend republicanism, representative government, and minorities.

Vincent Sheean, a personal friend to Thompson commented that,

She was vowed, with an absolute sincerity for which my observations offer no parallel, to the destruction of Adolf Hitler and the system of thought and action presented by him...Dorothy is the only person I ever knew who could recite every single word of the Constitution of the United States, the Declaration of

⁴⁰ Moore, *Know Your Enemy*, 54.

⁴¹ Dorothy Thompson, *Let the Record Speak* (Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1939), 50.

Independence and the Gettysburg Address without faltering... She could say those words because they dwelt within her.⁴²

Most Americans did not feel that Hitler was a “real danger” to the United States and did not think it was their place to stop him.⁴³ Thompson’s work as a journalist and activist went up against this belief, challenging Americans to re-evaluate the principles for which they stood.

The Nazi regime did not immediately cause too much concern for the United States. Since the end of World War I the country had drawn back toward a unilateralist foreign policy and immigration had been severely restricted. Similar to some Nazi talking points, nativist ideas were also swirling within the United States. These were hostile ideas, attitudes, and actions against foreigners, founded upon the fear of their impact on American society.⁴⁴ The worry was that immigrants were actually working against American democracy and Protestant values, and that they would become dependents on the state.⁴⁵ Fears about foreigners as well as ideas about a global racial and national hierarchy favored some immigrants over others.⁴⁶ In the early 20th century, backed by concepts in the field of race science and eugenics, the focus for exclusion had shifted to immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.⁴⁷ By the 1920s, support for immigration restriction was overwhelming in congress.⁴⁸ The 1924 Johnson Reed Immigration Act was the first

⁴² Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 260.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 261.

⁴⁴ Hirtoa Hidetaka, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

⁴⁶ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

⁴⁷ Hirota, *Expelling the Poor*, 211.

⁴⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 20.

comprehensive restriction law that favored western and northern European immigrants through national quotas. The law created a system of visa controls to track the allocation of quotas which was restricted to 155,000 a year. The quotas for each country were based on two percent of the foreign born population residing in the United States in 1890 – since this preceded a rise in southern and eastern European immigration, this allowed northern Europeans to remain dominant.⁴⁹ Because of the Reed Johnson Act, after Hitler’s rise to power, Jews had to compete for the limited visas with other potential immigrants from their countries.

For many Americans this isolationist and anti-immigration environment was appropriate. On August 31, 1935, Congress passed the first Neutrality Act which banned exports of war related materials. In February 1936, Congress renewed the Neutrality Act until May of 1937 and also expanded it to prohibit loans to belligerent nations. The 1937 Neutrality Act was popularly supported due to the increasingly worrisome situation in Europe. In a column article on February 26, 1937, Thompson worked to combat these measures by discussing the privileged position of the United States to put an end to Hitler’s fascism. Expressing her views against the neutrality legislation, she wrote that the only way the western world could be assured of peace would be to “use the immense power and position of this country to see that no world war occurs, to act like a great nation, instead of behaving as though we were in the position of Denmark...”⁵⁰ Thompson suggested that as Americans, there were things that the public could urge the government to do to avoid a

⁴⁹ Ibid, 23.

⁵⁰ Thompson, *Let the Record Speak*, 78.

full scale war, such as showing united strength against Hitler's authoritarianism and welcoming refugees.

In an article on October 8, 1937, Thompson continued this narrative, declaring that "America must choose."⁵¹ She was reacting to President Roosevelt's speech in which he pledged his administration to a "concerted effort" with other peace-loving nations to "quarantine" aggressor nations. Thompson clearly viewed this political step as a win for the fight against Nazism. She went on to write, "If the country follows the leadership of the President... the Neutrality Act is dead... We shall weep no tears for the demise of the Neutrality Act."⁵² By concluding with the statement "it takes two to make a war, but only one to make a conquest," Thompson urged the American people to realize that the United States should take an official stance against Nazi Germany, because if it didn't there was nothing to stop fascism from spreading.⁵³

At the same time that Thompson started a discussion about political action to stand against Nazism, she also worked on stirring a humanitarian consciousness and mission to aid German Jews. Those around her noted that she was sustained to do this tireless work by "a conviction that what she was doing was valuable to her country and to the freedom of humanity."⁵⁴ Thompson's humanitarian activism was certainly triggered by a personal sense of connection to those being persecuted. In *Nazism: An Assault on Civilization*, she

⁵¹ Ibid, 101- 04.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, 104.

⁵⁴ Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 272.

wrote, “The inner struggles of thousands of these people cannot be described, it can only be encompassed by the sympathetic imagination.”⁵⁵

Between 1934 and 1938, Thompson watched as the situation of Jews in Germany grew progressively worse. Increasing numbers of Jews began to leave their homeland, seeking refuge in countries that would allow them in. Many of those who sought to emigrate to the United States “found a multitude of obstacles in their path.”⁵⁶ In 1934, Thompson wrote, “sixty thousand Jews have already left Germany, in spite of the extraordinary difficulties of finding other homes in a world where nearly every country discourages immigration.”⁵⁷ As time went on she couldn’t take her mind off the refugees. In her March 31, 1936 column, she hinted at the need for organized action by stating, “Fascism has got to be answered with a positive and constructive program. *For only a little while longer can Europe drift.*”⁵⁸

A Personal Mission

On May 12, 1935, Thompson made a revealing speech for the Jewish Relief Fund in Philadelphia. At the beginning of her speech she discussed her own personal mission to aid Jewish refugees:

Two years ago, just two years ago, in May 1933, when weeks that I had spent in Germany just after Hitler had come to power, had filled me with horror, fear, pity, and indignation at what was being done to the Jews of Germany, I made a pledge to myself that I would never, insofar as it was humanly possible, forego an opportunity to protest at what had been done, and to plea for help to right it. I did not make that resolution to myself because I am pro-Jewish... until the Spring of

⁵⁵ Alfred Smith, ed., *Nazism: An Assault on Civilization* (Harrison Smith, 1934), 13.

⁵⁶ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 86.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Nazism*, 12.

⁵⁸ Thompson, *Let the Record Speak*, 29.

1933 I had never asked myself such a foolish question as whether I was pro-Jewish, or pro-English, or pro-French, or pro-German... I am pro-human.⁵⁹

Here, Thompson's personal sense of responsibility shines through. This quote offers insight into her mission. She certainly did care for the Jewish community, but in a wider sense she saw Jewish persecution as a gross attack on humanism and democratic ideals. Thompson continued to address the audience, stating "All of us belong to the world of Western culture ... I am not speaking for your world. I am speaking for our world -- the world that we all share and that is threatened. I am not here as your apologist, but as your ally!"⁶⁰ For Thompson, this humanistic approach to aiding the refugee crisis would apply in the years to come.

Later in her speech Thompson revealed the personal emotion that she brought to her fight, which she attributed to her unique identity as a woman journalist. She said, "I am a woman, and share the weakness of my sex to think personally rather than statistically. When I think of the condition of the Jews...I think... of the people I know... individual people whom I know."⁶¹ Thompson then gave multiple accounts of Jewish friends who were mishandled by the Nazis and forced to leave their country. Then, Thompson made the point she was building up to: "I ask you for help for the Jewish German children."⁶² She told the audience that scores of Jewish children had been sent overseas to be temporarily adopted and educated by sympathetic families. To set the mood for audience

⁵⁹ Speech for the Jewish Relief Fund in Philadelphia, 12 May 1935, page 1-2, Speeches: Jewish Question folder, box 103, manuscripts, DT papers.

⁶⁰ Speech for the Jewish Relief Fund in Philadelphia, 12 May 1935, page 3, Speeches: Jewish Question folder, box 103, DT papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries [Hereafter Speech for the Jewish Relief Fund in Philadelphia, 12 May 1935].

⁶¹ Speech for the Jewish Relief Fund in Philadelphia, 12 May 1935, 6.

⁶² Ibid.

members to take action Thompson told a detailed story that a friend in Hamburg had related to her:

One morning he was watching twenty kids being sent off... a brown shirted customs official was going through their suitcases... “What is in that bag?” The child did not answer, and he spoke more sharply, “Come, my boy, speak up!” I must know what you are taking!” The child swallowed hard, and in an almost inaudible voice, he answered: “German soil.”⁶³

Concluding the speech Thompson pleaded with her audience, “the problem is immense, and it is manifold. But anything like a solution for it depends upon one thing -- money. A great deal of money.”⁶⁴ As this speaking engagement shows, Thompson was a key figure to aid in fundraising around the country. She was asked by the Jewish Relief Fund of Philadelphia to come and speak, hoping to raise awareness and sympathy within their community. However, even while speaking before all-Jewish audiences, Thompson made a point to discuss how “the matter of German emigres [was] an international affair” and she purposefully used emotion as a way to convince her listeners of the gravity of the problem.⁶⁵ This idea would soon turn into a personal crusade for Thompson; creating organizations and initiatives that demanded aid and action from all kinds of Americans.

Thompson’s Private Influence: *It Can’t Happen Here*

Beyond her public persona as a newspaper woman, lecturer, and a voice on the radio, Dorothy Thompson also worked behind the scenes to influence American understanding of the Nazi menace and harness sympathy for Jews. Between 1934 and 1938,

⁶³ Ibid, 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 10.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 6.

following the influence of Eugenie Schwarzwald, Thompson began cultivating her own American salon headquartered in New York City. She called her guests “members of her personal brain trust,” tapping them for material and expertise for her columns. She hosted lavish dinner parties where she would talk about the European situation over cigarettes and scotch with experts from every field.⁶⁶ Sinclair Lewis was always at these events, and unsurprisingly, he too was influenced by his wife’s relentless thoughts about the European situation.

The best example of how Thompson inspired those around her in the mid-1930s was her role in the creation of Lewis’s best-selling novel *It Can’t Happen Here*⁶⁷ and the couple’s subsequent battle with Hollywood to turn it into an influential feature film that severely condemned fascism, revealed the Nazi threat to western democracies, and portrayed sympathy for Jews.⁶⁸ By 1935 fears over domestic fascism were on the rise. For example, Huey Long, a concerning populist leader, had been elected governor in Louisiana from 1928 to 1932, then held a position as senator, and by this time was seriously considering running for president on a third-party ticket.⁶⁹ Lewis was one person who took Thompson’s warnings about the spread of Nazism seriously and with her guidance and analysis of what was happening in Germany, he began imagining what a Hitler-inspired American dictatorship would look like.

⁶⁶ Ware, *Letter to the World*, 47 and “The It Girl,” Clippings on Dorothy Thompson folder, box 58, SL Papers.

⁶⁷ Sinclair Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here* (New York: Sun Dial Press, 1935).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Ben Urwand, *The Collaboration: Hollywood’s Pact with Hitler* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2013), 161. See other works about Hollywood’s censorship during the 1930s: Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Hollywood’s Censor: Joseph I. Breen & the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) and Thomas Patrick, Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

During the summer of 1935 Lewis wrote feverishly, finishing the anti-fascist book by early August. His novel followed the story of Berzelius (buzz) Windrip, a senator who stole the 1936 election from FDR and became America's first dictator. He was modeled after Hitler and employed Nazi methods including patrolling uniformed troops, gaining control of the press, creating an official salute, and being referred to as "the chief." Thompson described many of Hitler's statements and mannerisms to her husband and they made their way into Windrip's character. In addition, the hero of the book, a newspaperman named Doremus Jessup, was modeled after Dorothy Thompson herself. Lewis admitted that Jessup's storyline was inspired by Thompson's real-life anti-Nazi crusade. In the novel Jessup briefly succumbed to Windrip but then risked his life in an effort to destroy the dictatorship in defense of American democracy. The novel's message was clear: Americans must be vigilant and carefully preserve American values of freedom and critical inquiry or they could easily find themselves in a Hitler-like world. Before the novel was even released in October, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios (MGM) had already purchased the screen rights from Lewis and the book soon sold more than 320,000 copies.⁷⁰

The plan for the big screen was to use Hitler's revolutionary propaganda methods against him. Thompson was in her husband's ear throughout the process of adapting his written word to the screen. If Hollywood was on board, she thought it could be a glorious anti-fascist propaganda piece that would expose the masses to the importance of American democracy and the evils of Nazism, advising Lewis: "I really think you should consider making it an uproarious satire."⁷¹ Initially MGM, excited by this idea, planned to assemble

⁷⁰ Urwand, *The Collaboration*, 161-64.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 175.

the greatest film stars “to make one of the most controversial productions of the decade and use Hitler’s own methods against him.”⁷² Sidney Howard, one of the highest paid screenwriters in Hollywood, was selected to work on the project. He made sure to keep all the daring parts of the novel in the screenplay, including concentration camps set up for enemies of the regime, women waiting in illegal bread lines, Minute Men (the uniformed police) spying on friends and each other, and Jews being taken away (no one knew where).⁷³ The screenplay also did not shy away from Jessup’s (Thompson’s) mission. Similar to how Thompson recognized her judgement error about the Nazi threat to liberal democracy and then worked to correct it, the turning point of the film had the hero state: “All us lazy-minded democrats are responsible... I used to think that wars and depressions were brought on by diplomats and bankers. They were brought on by us liberals... because we did nothing to stop them.”⁷⁴ The rest of the film followed Jessup as newly “awakened” to the horror of fascism and watched him spend all day and night working on an underground newspaper exposing the horrors of the regime. Eventually he was arrested and brought to a concentration camp where the viewer watched him get tortured. The most powerful line of the script was when Jessup was close to death and the guards called him “a living corpse... like the American spirit.” As Thompson and Lewis had intended with the novel, the moral of the film was clear – Americans needed to wake up to the fascist forces in Europe and around them. Jessup eventually escaped from the camp and joined a resistance organization which was strong enough to embroil the US in a civil war. The

⁷² Ibid, 165.

⁷³ Ibid, 168.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 169.

movie script ended without resolution, with Jessup eerily singing the American Civil War and abolitionist tune “John Brown’s Body,”⁷⁵ indicating that America’s fate – and soul – was still up for grabs.

The completed script was sent to the Hays Office, which enforced 1930s movie production codes in the United States. The Hays Office used the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, which was established because of films’ newfound power over mass audiences. The goal was “to bind movies to Judeo-Christian morality” and suppress films with controversial themes such as “criminal violence, the depiction of national or ethnic groups, birth control, suicide, drinking, abortion, sexual license, and racial relations.”⁷⁶ Interestingly, part of the motivation for the formation of the Hays Office was a worry that there was too much Jewish influence in motion pictures and that Jews were profiting from producing immoral films – a telling example of the existence of American antisemitism in these years.⁷⁷ In 1935, after the Hays Office read the script for *It Can’t Happen Here*, there was much skepticism about its content – was it too condemning of Germany? Should Americans see this much violence? Wasn’t it nothing more than provocative fiction – after all Jews certainly weren’t being treated that badly, were they? Indeed, Joseph Breen, the well-known film censor who applied the Production Code for the Hays Office, worried that “it is hardly more than a story portraying the Hitlerization of the United States of America. It is an attempt to bring home to the American citizens, that which is transpiring in

⁷⁵ “History of ‘John Brown’s Body’ | American Experience | PBS,” accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/brown-history-john-browns-body/>.

⁷⁶ Stephen Vaughn, “Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code,” *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (1990): 39–65.

⁷⁷ Stephen Vaughn, “Morality and Entertainment,” 46.

Germany today” and that it could cause a damaging effect on Hollywood’s foreign film markets.⁷⁸ Breen told Louis B. Mayer of MGM that the story was “so inflammatory in nature, and so filled with dangerous material that only the greatest possible care will save it from being rejected on all sides” and, because of this, he requested more than 60 scene cuts.⁷⁹ Despite this scrutiny, Mayer believed in the story’s message and tried to push forward.

However, illustrating the tension and fear present in the American Jewish community over how vocally they should protest Nazi Germany, some Jewish leaders outside of Hollywood worked to halt the film’s production. A real estate agent from Philadelphia named Albert H. Lieberman panicked and wrote to his local rabbi that he worried about repercussions in Germany and in the United States if Jewish persecution was highlighted on screen. His rabbi, William H. Fineshriber, was chair of the committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and he had an excellent personal relationship with Mayer and the Hays Office.⁸⁰ On February 7, 1936 he wrote to Mayer the following statement: “I have considered the problem at great length, and I am of the opinion that a film version of the story, howsoever interpreted and directed, will have anything but a beneficial effect upon the Jewish Problem. More and more, I am convinced that during these highly critical days for the Jewish people, here and elsewhere, we ought not to thrust the Jew and his problems too much into the limelight. I am quite sure that any interpretation of the story made by your firm will be forceful and certainly not seemingly detrimental to

⁷⁸ Urwand, *The Collaboration*, 171.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid,173.

the Jewish cause, but there are times when to say nothing is better than to say something favorable.”⁸¹ He also wrote to Hays, “The only wise method to pursue in these days of virulent anti-Semitism is to have no picture in which the Jewish Problem is ventilated.” Finally, he told another powerful MGM executive, Nicholas Schenck, “I know full-well that the picture, if produced by you, will be a splendid pro-Jewish and anti-Fascist interpretation, but I believe that now is the time for us to keep silent. If the story could be told without allowing the Jewish problem to be presented, it might not be so bad, but I can’t, for the life of me, see how you can divorce the two.”⁸² Because of these suggestions, MGM attempted to tone down the film’s focus on Jews, having the Windrip government persecute characters who “looked like Jews” but who were overtly described as “foreigners” rather than Jews.⁸³ These revisions were not enough to assuage any fears and after Mayer and Hays consulted about the rabbi’s concerns, they cancelled and effectively banned the movie version of *It Can’t Happen Here*.

According to historian Ben Urwand, the final decision to cancel the film was shrouded in mystery to many who were involved in its production. Sidney Howard and Sinclair Lewis were never fully informed of the reasoning for cancellation. They were told that it was due to “financial constraints.” They suspected that this was highly unlikely as the film had been cast, sets made, and it was scheduled to start filming in the coming week.⁸⁴ Lewis was aware of the Hays Office’s initial hesitation and criticism of the general

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid, 174.

⁸⁴ “LEWIS SAYS HAYS BANS FILM OF BOOK: Screening of ‘It Can’t Happen Here’ Is Barred Because of Politics, Author Charges. DENIED BY ‘CZAR’S’ AIDE Studio Also Makes Denial, but Admits ‘Temporary’ Deferring of the Production. LEWIS SAYS HAYS HAS BANNED FILM,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1936.

content in the film. He assumed that this office had been the force pushing the cancellation. On February 15 he publicly called Hays the “movie czar” and said the film version was banned due to “fear of international politics and fear of boycotts abroad.”⁸⁵ His statement concluded with the following analysis: “The world is full today of Fascist propaganda. The Germans are making one pro-Fascist film after another, designed to show that Fascism is superior to liberal democracy ... But Mr. Hays actually says that a film cannot be made showing the horrors of fascism and extolling the advantages of liberal democracy because Hitler and Mussolini might ban other Hollywood films from their countries if we were so rash. Democracy is certainly on the defensive when two European dictators, without opening their mouths or knowing anything about the issue, can shut down an American film causing the loss of \$200,000 to the producer. I wrote ‘It Can’t Happen Here,’ but I begin to think it certainly can.”⁸⁶ Interestingly, the day after Lewis made this statement, the Nazi government came forward to support MGM’s decision to cancel. They released a statement saying that with this decision the US had avoided an official protest in Berlin and for good measure they also added that Sinclair Lewis was “a full-blooded Communist.”⁸⁷ Following this, Lewis heavily promoted his book in newspapers with ads that branded the message as “Too Hot for Hollywood”⁸⁸ and urging Americans to “Read it and see for yourself...Hollywood can censor every motion picture theatre in the country, *but it cannot yet censor your bookseller.*”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “BERLIN AND ROME HAIL ‘BAN’ ON LEWIS FILM: Meanwhile Metro Chief Says ‘All This Talk’ May Spur Early Start on Picture.,” *New York Times*, February 17m 1936, sec. AMUSEMENTS.

⁸⁸ “Display Ad 19 -- No Title,” *New York Times*, February 18, 1936, sec. RADIO-ART BOOKS and “Display Ad 19 -- No Title,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1936, sec. BOOKS.

⁸⁹ Urwand, *The Collaboration*, 176.

While we do not know the private conversations between Thompson and her husband about the situation surrounding the film's ban and Thompson did not leave a paper trail of her own thoughts, it is useful to see how much of her own experience and growing activism influenced Lewis' initial story and her role behind the scenes. Clearly the anti-fascist, pro-democratic, and pro-Jewish messages that she had been pushing for more than three years had influenced her husband and his writing. From here, they spread to a vast audience in an entirely new format: realistic fiction. Although it is not apparent how Thompson felt about the film's cancellation, she was undoubtedly disappointed that this American anti-fascist propaganda film was not realized and could not be seen by mass audiences. Furthermore, the situation surrounding the film's cancellation reveals the extent of worry over how to navigate the "Jewish Problem" within the American Jewish community. Thompson, aided by her non-Jewish identity, was able to vocalize the "Jewish problem" while many American Jews felt that this was far too dangerous for them to publicize their suffering. The events surrounding the film's cancellation also make evident that due to the political and cultural atmosphere, certain initially harmless barriers – like the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 – existed, and persisted, when pushing anti-fascist and pro-democratic initiatives in the American environment. In the coming year Dorothy Thompson's public and private activist initiatives to combat Nazism and aid Jewish refugees proliferated with a goal to alter this, at best, apathetic atmosphere.

CHAPTER 4: AVENUES OF ACTIVISM AND THE CRISIS OF 1938: THE EVIAN CONFERENCE

By 1938, Thompson had widely established the problems and threat of Nazism, and she was growing restless for action from others. She began to advocate for the United States to aid in the refugee crisis, arguing that the nation had a moral, democratic, and humanitarian obligation to step up. By this time, Thompson's readership had grown to as many as ten million readers a day,¹ and she had an extensive overseas network of correspondents, diplomats, and friends who kept her informed. At this time she also had a twice weekly radio broadcast to further engage with her audiences.² In April, NBC News ran ads saying that Thompson's "Telephone is Hooked up to the World" and "there's always a busy signal" because she "knows when and where the stories will break."³ Thompson's keen eye for humanitarian stories and her many informants allowed her to bring up to date and shocking news to the American people that would hopefully inspire action on their part. This period is Thompson's most crucial window of influence and action as it related to the general public as well as the United States government. Her reporting increasingly turned toward the full-fledged refugee crisis, which she tried to combat through an urgent outflow of public and personal humanitarian initiatives such as

¹ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 232.

² *NBC News Service Article*, 7 April 1936, 1936-1938 folder, box 73, DT Papers.

³ *Ibid.*

journalistic campaigns and successful intervention with the State Department and the FDR administration.

Anschluss and the Growing Refugee Crisis

In the latter 1930s Dorothy Thompson spent the majority of her time in New York City, reserving Vermont for summertime. However, in both places she conducted her salon environment. Her daily routine went like this: After waking up and reading newspapers from across the United States and Europe in bed, she “snatch[ed] up the telephone and, pacing back and forth, call[ed] Washington, London, or Paris” for the rest of the day she would write and prepare speeches and in the evenings she would host parties for entertainment, intellectual conversation, and politics.⁴ By 1938 she had personally built up an impressive international cabinet of advisors and experts who she continually turned to for information and counsel when reporting on various issues or attempting to influence others. Some people in this unofficial cabinet included: Harold Nicolson, the British M.P.; Alexander Sachs and Gustav Stolper, economists; Morris Ersnt, attorney; Raoul de Roussy de Sales, American Correspondent; Chaim Weizmann, Zionist leader; James G. McDonald, American diplomat; and Hamilton Fish Armstrong, editor of Foreign Affairs. Almost every authority or prominent person that Thompson came in contact with was added into this ever-expanding circle and, given the personal nature of the relationships and the fields of expertise, these people held tremendous value for boosting her various humanitarian initiatives.

⁴ “The It Girl,” Clippings on Dorothy Thompson folder, box 58, SL Papers.

With Nazi Germany's *Anschluss* of Austria on March 12, 1938, the Jewish refugee problem swelled, and consequently Dorothy Thompson intensified her public demands for American humanitarian initiatives. Because of Germany's expanded territory an additional 190,000 Jews were brought under the Nazis control.⁵ Adolf Eichmann was tasked with overseeing emigration policy in Vienna, and he was anxious to demonstrate how quickly the Jewish problem could be solved through expulsion.⁶ Immediately after the *Anschluss*, widespread antisemitic actions orchestrated by Eichmann and the fear of an impending war pushed many Jews toward a decision to emigrate. Finding a destination was no easier now than it had been in the earlier years, yet about 36,000 Jews managed to leave Germany and Austria in 1938, and 77,000 left in 1939.⁷ However, there were severe obstacles in their path and thousands could not escape. By the beginning of 1938, the Nazis had declared that Jews could not take more than ten percent of their capital with them and by June it was declared that they could take nearly nothing.⁸ Furthermore, the increase in visa applications to enter the United States posed an issue for those hoping to find refuge; the immigration quotas on the books were still from the 1920s.

The United States did not implement a special refugee policy during the Nazi years. Instead, persecuted people had to navigate the complex and tedious immigration process that congress had passed in 1924. On both sides of the Atlantic, passports, visas, statements of character and financial backing had to be in order and conform to German and American

⁵ Friedländer, *The Years of Persecution*, 243.

⁶ Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue*, 23.

⁷ "German Jewish Refugees, 1933–1939," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005468>.

⁸ Rosen, *Saving the Jews*, 16.

policy.⁹ In the United States the possible quotas from the Johnson Reed Act went repeatedly unfilled and they were not allowed to roll over to the next year.¹⁰ For many refugees who were no longer classified as citizens in greater Germany, it was difficult to obtain the proper paperwork and meet the American immigration standards. These strict regulations only allowed for a fraction of the allotted quota number to enter the country each year. An overall anti-immigrant atmosphere persisted in 1930s America. Opinion polls from the late 1930s and early 1940s, indicated that about one-third of the American public was anti-Semitic¹¹ and by 1940 there were more than one hundred antisemitic organizations throughout the United States.¹² These sentiments help explain why so many quotas went unfulfilled when European Jews desperately needed them.

Thompson was well aware of the antisemitic and xenophobic atmosphere in the United States. With her audience knowledgeable about Nazi policy toward German, and now Austrian Jews, Thompson began writing harshly about the immigration laws on the books in the US. She also attacked the American version of antisemitism persistent throughout these years, exposing the hypocrisy inside her own country which claimed to offer refuge for these exact problems. With the glaring obstacles of US immigration quotas and public disapproval in the way, Thompson was one of few influential non-Jewish activists who sincerely intended to aid Jewish refugees and ease immigration restriction.

⁹ Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*, 194-95.

¹⁰ The German quota went unfilled each year even though the waiting list for those seeking a visa was constantly expanding. 1939 was the only year in which the German quota maxed out at 27,370 – even though nearly 140,000 people remained on the waiting list.

¹¹ Robert Moses Shapiro, *Why Didn't the Press Shout?: American & International Journalism during the Holocaust* (Hoboken, N.J.: Yeshiva Univ. Press in Association with KTAV Pub. House, 2003), 3.

¹² Shapiro, *Why Didn't the Press Shout?*, 3.

Dorothy Thompson's Public Refugee Campaign

To start pushing against American complacency, Thompson's first initiative focused on what she did best – she began a public campaign writing and speaking about her analysis of the swelling refugee crisis and what Americans needed to do as a response. When she first published a coherent analysis of her thoughts and suggested a massive emigration plan in March 1938, she “launched a new public debate about US immigration policy with a strong appeal to decision-makers to oppose the National-Socialist expulsion of innocent citizens and to take responsibility for the refugee problem in Europe.”¹³ The idea that she was the main force behind this push has been stated by historians for a long time.¹⁴ However, previous investigations have only made general statements about Thompson's involvement and have not provided comprehensive documentation of how her influence played out at the governmental level behind closed doors.

In her public campaign she condemned the “National Origins Act” or the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which virtually shut America's doors to certain types of “undesirable” immigrants.¹⁵ She also condemned the “paper walls” or bureaucratically designed obstacles within the immigration process to keep Jews off American shores. She became even more adamant in denouncing America's inaction towards the refugee crisis with the

¹³ Anne Kleine, “Conscience, Conflict and Politics. The Rescue of Political Refugees from Southern France to the United States, 1940–1942.” *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 43, no. 1 (1998): 287.

¹⁴ See Kurth, *American Cassandra*; Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*; Henry Feingold in *Politics of Rescue* states the following on page 23: “Dorothy Thompson, who, almost singlehandedly, aroused the American public to the plight of the refugees, was generally credited with having a considerable part in making the conference a reality.” Yet, this work does not explore this claim or the details of how the Evian Conference emerged; In Breitman and Kraut's *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1939-1945*, on page 57 Thompson is identified as a “key lobbyist” who proposed the “establishment of a new international organization to deal with the refugee problem on a broad scale.”

¹⁵ “Immigration to the United States 1933–1941,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008297>.

proposed dismantling of the Nansen Office of the League of Nations, which was the only body that tried to solve the refugee crisis internationally.¹⁶ In an “On the Record” column published in April 1938, she declared that there “is a very serious refugee problem already, and the events of the last weeks [the *Anschluss*], and the probable events of the immediate future, have accelerated and will augment it.”¹⁷

Combining her various writings and outlining her own vision for an international solution to the refugee crisis, Thompson published an article in *Foreign Affairs*, this time strictly concerning the refugee crisis. The article “Refugees: A World Problem,” was soon after lengthened into a book titled *Refugees: Anarchy or Organization?*¹⁸ Both pushed back against the increasing xenophobic and anti-Semitic sentiment which threatened to decrease immigration quotas even further. Thompson argued that there “need[ed] to be a comprehensive world agency” for immigration due to refugees being “trapped between a country that had spat them out and a country that would not let them in.”¹⁹ The dedication of her book reads, “to my friends in exile, amongst them some of the noblest spirits and most gifted minds that I have ever known,” showing how much she truly cared about this cause and the human beings caught up in the crisis. She argued that the refugee crisis was an economic, political, and social world issue and envisioned an international fund for resettlement of all political exiles through some program like that of the *Haavara* in Palestine, which exchanged refugees for exported goods. Thompson called for a similar program where some countries, such as the US, would exchange exports with other

¹⁶ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 277.

¹⁷ Thompson, *Let the Record Speak*, 166.

¹⁸ Dorothy Thompson, *Refugees: Anarchy or Organization?* (Random House, 1938).

¹⁹ Thompson, *Refugees*, 28-29.

countries if they opened their doors to refugees. She reasoned that this would help everyone involved as well as being a work around for the strong opinions against increased immigration to the United States. This proposal aligned with “liberal” ideology, and clearly championed the internationalist intention for world cooperation that could produce benefits if democracies worked together.

Her proposal came at a vital time for Jews trying to escape the Nazi menace because they could no longer go to Palestine in large numbers. The problem of the Arab Revolt caused Great Britain to severely limit Jewish immigration to the “national home” in Palestine in order to placate the Arab population. In the summer of 1937, the British decided that the current mandate system in Palestine was “unworkable” and in light of this, Jewish immigration could not exceed the annual figure of 12,000. Thompson argued that whatever decision was to come, “all hopes of anything like Jewish mass emigration to Palestine have to be buried.”²⁰ Thompson pointed out to the American people that the closing of Palestine was a major setback which helped to augment the crisis because it was no longer an “effective refuge” for the many thousands trying to flee Hitler’s Europe.²¹ She reasoned that the western world needed to come together to find a more effective solution to provide destinations for refugees that had no place to go.

In her writings, Thompson explained the cause of the growing crisis, telling her readers that in Germany, “Jews are being deprived of the means to continue living in the homes they have had for centuries... The victory of the Nazis [in Austria] creates a vast new problem of refugees... Rumania is experimenting with anti-Semitic laws...[and] the

²⁰ Klein, *Conscience, Conflict, and Politics*, 385-86.

²¹ Thompson, *Refugees*, 30.

Jewish question in Poland has been acute for some years.”²² She also cautioned that as more countries fall under Nazi control, the growth of anti-semitism would be certain. Thompson argued that these factors presented not just a humanitarian challenge, but a governmental challenge to “all responsible political circles.”²³ She demanded that a comprehensive international political effort must be undertaken to alleviate the crisis.

Her plan required the establishment of a “body of outstanding leadership, such expert personnel, and such strong financial support that it will command universal respect and be beyond all question competent to deal with the problem in all its phases—diplomatic, financial, economic, legal.”²⁴ She suggested that this body would collectively decide for some countries to make financial arrangements to support refugees, and for others to physically take on the immigrants.²⁵ She thought this would be an effective way to aid a substantial number of refugees because countries that did not physically want to take on more immigrants could monetarily support countries who could accommodate the influx and needed economic benefits. Thompson suggested that for this to happen studies would have to be made of opportunities for land settlement in “regions not greatly developed (e.g. in Latin America, Africa, the Soviet Far East). Thompson was also aware of the potential criticism of such a plan – the fact that it would necessitate bargaining with Nazi Germany to reach a solution. Her perspective was that while this was not the most satisfactory solution, “the best that can be hoped is that if this is done the fate of the persecuted can be

²² Dorothy Thompson, “Refugees: A World Problem,” *Foreign Affairs* 16, no. 3 (1938): 375.

²³ *Ibid*, 386.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 377.

²⁵ Thompson, *Refugees*, 394.

softened by compromise” rather than hardened by the Nazis.²⁶ Thompson also mentioned that she had a close friend who previously worked for the Nansen Committee who vouched for the financial viability of such an international solution.²⁷ Because of the past success of *Havaara*, this friend also thought the Nazis would be willing to enter such negotiations.

Beyond the financial feasibility for some countries and the Nazis’ potential willingness, Thompson also saw this alternative as something the American people could stand behind, as it wouldn’t necessarily mean taking on more immigrants. To convince her audience, she wrote,

The world [has] turned into a jungle, and the refugees are merely the people forced to run away from one part of the jungle to another. Their personal tragedy can only serve one great social purpose. They are and should be recognized as an advancing crowd shouting a great warning.²⁸

Thompson considered her writings as functioning like a high-pitched whistle, warning of what was to come if the American people kept silent. She turned the problem into a moral conundrum by saying that, “to admit that the whole round earth has no place left for men and women of peculiar and expert skill, once the doors of their own land closed behind them, is to admit that the whole round earth, as it is at present organized, is a colossal and incurable failure.”²⁹ Furthering this notion of failure, Thompson suggested the “inhumane” nature of the times, where for “thousands and thousands of people a piece of paper with a stamp on it is the difference between life and death.”³⁰ She made a point to say that others, including Americans, had the ability to assist and did not. She appealed to the masses by

²⁶ Thompson, “Refugees,” 380.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 381.

²⁸ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 279.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 168.

³⁰ Thompson, *Refugees*, 28.

arguing that democracy is a direct “revulsion against persecution of individuals,”³¹ and further argued that the racial aspects of antisemitism were invalid. In one section she wrote that as a forty-four-year-old woman, “if I have been menaced by Jews, I haven’t noticed it yet. A Jewish physician saved my life once, and I assure you I wasn’t interested in his grandmother at the time...”³²

By trying to appeal to emotions, she wrote, “I speak of anti-Semitism in the United States, not because I stand here as a friend of the ‘Jews’— I say it is not American to speak of ‘the Jews’ – there is no such thing as ‘the Jews.’”³³ She deplored the racial rhetoric and new antisemitism and declared that, “only a fraction are Jews by the standards of any other world than that of Mr. Hitler.”³⁴ Revealing her strong belief that Jews were a religious and ethnic community, she called out antisemitism as an artificial creation of a race problem within the white race. Because of this, Thompson argued that a moral obligation, and a historical obligation, necessitated that Americans step up and lead a global response.³⁵

Thompson looked at the rise of antisemitism in the US as an assault on the very foundation of American democracy, saying that to “close one’s eyes to it would be ‘ostracism’ in an acute form.”³⁶ Her appeal to the American public tried to point out flaws in the general logic of the time; that is, barring Jews in need by looking the other way when America was founded by immigrants fleeing forms of persecution. Her book highlighted how America was built on refugees coming to the new land of freedom, and therefore, if

³¹ Ibid, 11.

³² Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 282.

³³ Ibid, 285.

³⁴ Thompson, *Refugees*, 56.

³⁵ Ibid, 63.

³⁶ Kurth, 285.

Americans did not act in the present, then they were denying the very foundations of their nationhood.³⁷ She concluded her impassioned call to action by writing, “we are moved not merely by pity for the exiles, but by the need to reaffirm our own beliefs, to take a stand for them, to re-capture the ground which our indifference has lost.”³⁸ She made the issue an undeniably international problem as well as “American problem.”

As with some of her early speeches, Thompson’s appeal for action was aimed at gentiles and Jews, alike. She called for the collaboration of “Jews and Christians” to stand for “Western principles of democratic law and order.”³⁹ She consistently wrote that the question of the time was whether or not Western civilization and democratic principles would survive, saying that “the place to stand and work and fight for its survival is not, for us, in Germany, but is here, in this country, which is dear to you and me.”⁴⁰

Her extensive public campaign and proposal for an international solution to help the increasingly trapped Jews of Europe was a contributing catalyst for the State Department to convene and discuss refugees with thirty-two nations at the Evian Conference in the summer of 1938.⁴¹ An internal State Department Memorandum prepared by an individual in the Division of European Affairs described the Evian Conference as originating from the heightened public pressure in the spring of 1938 that the refugee crisis created. The memorandum stated, “Dorothy Thompson and certain Congressmen with metropolitan constituencies were the principal sources of this [public] pressure.”⁴² It is no

³⁷ Thompson, *Refugees*, 121.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 122.

³⁹ Thompson, “Refugees.”

⁴⁰ Thompson, *Refugees*, 122.

⁴¹ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 280.

⁴² See Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Random House, 1968), 203 and William R. Perl, *The Holocaust Conspiracy: An International Policy of Genocide*.

surprise that this is the case because Thompson's influence on the issue was so far-reaching – touching those closely following her in the United States as well as other interested parties abroad. For example, her public campaign in the spring of 1938 was monitored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁴³ in Warsaw as well as the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Hamburg.⁴⁴ Both offices had clippings of her news articles and the latter also had a copy of her book *Refugees: Anarchy or Organization?*. This type of reach indicates that Dorothy Thompson was the public frontwoman garnering sympathy and interest for the plight of refugees and almost singlehandedly convinced the US government to officially react.

Dorothy Thompson's Private Refugee Campaign: The State Department and FDR

Because of Dorothy Thompson's far-reaching public persona and the continued pressure she was exerting on the situation, she can also be identified as the behind-the-scenes inspiration of the federal government's response through the State Department. Throughout the spring of 1938 Thompson persistently communicated with the State Department about her vision for a refugee crisis solution. Beginning immediately after the *Anschluss*, Thompson offered strong guidance and the State Department yielded to her many demands. From this internal campaign with the US government, Thompson initiated the creation of the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees (PACOPR) and

(New York: Shapolsky Publishers, 1989), 42-43 and Paul R. Bartrop, *The Evian Conference of 1938 and the Jewish Refugee Crisis* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁴³ 2311 Żydzi w USA a Polska. Raporty, rezolucje, korespondencja, przeglądy i wycinki prasowe, broszury, 1937-1938, RG-15.372, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych w Warszawie (Sygn. 322), Records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, USHMM.

⁴⁴ Zespol 476 - Konsulat w Hamburgu, Konsulat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w Hamburgu (Sygn.476), RG-15.517, International Holocaust Documentation Archive, USHMM.

her goal of creating an international committee to communally solve the crisis came to fruition with the Evian Conference and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees that came in its wake. Thompson's decision to individually approach members of the State Department and the FDR administration rather than working to pass immigration reform in congress suggests that she thought a personal initiative that demanded action on an international scale could achieve more than any individual country's government could. Perhaps this was wishful thinking, however, given her sincere belief in democratic cooperation and the fact that the isolationist congress would not be willing to back such a liberal plan, her focus on working directly with the executive branch through the State Department was smart and tactical.

The first record of correspondence between Thompson and the State Department concerning the burgeoning refugee crisis occurred on March 15 – a mere three days after the *Anschluss*.⁴⁵ Thompson called the Department and spoke with Secretary of State Cordell Hull about her immediate concerns. She first reached out about what she thought were relatively simple issues such as asking whether the American government could issue special Certificates of Identity in lieu of passports to those Austrians already in the country who did not wish to become German citizens. She then brought up the question of creating an actual organization to aid the emigration of refugees. She sent along her forthcoming article in *Foreign Affairs* and directly asked whether the State Department could “officially

⁴⁵ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Cordell Hull, March 16, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; (National Archives Publication M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938); Records of the Department of State Relating to the Problems of Relief and Refugees in Europe Arising from World War II and Its Aftermath, 1938-1949, Record Group 59; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. [Hereafter M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP]

or unofficially collaborate with a plan of establishing an international diplomatic service for all refugees.” Furthermore, revealing the powerful support she had on her side, she told Hull that she was planning to gather a group of “prominent citizens” in the next week to discuss the possibility of creating a refugee aid committee for those “whose lives have become impossible” under German rule and that she hoped that the US government could be involved. Hull did not offer immediate answers. Rather, he directed someone else to deal with her.

The next day, Secretary Hull directed Jay Pierrepont Moffat, Chief of the Western Europe Division, to call Thompson back to inquire further about her suggestions.⁴⁶ Apparently during this call Thompson “promptly launched into a series of new and very technical questions, such as: Under what conditions would the Austrian quota cease to exist as a separate quota?; what could be done on behalf of Austrians now in this country who did not wish to accept German passports?; what would be the status of a refugee entering this country as a temporary visitor if at the end of his period of admission he found no other place to go?” The record of this call shows that with Thompson, the State Department was up against a very informed and determined individual who would not be pacified after a little well-meaning discussion. When Moffat tried to push her off onto a third person, George Warren, the Chief of the Visa Office, Thompson stood her ground and reminded Moffat that what she “really had in mind was a broader question of policy” – not an issue with a few visas. Moffat recognized this and noted that what Thompson desired was a

⁴⁶ Department of State Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Dorothy Thompson and Mr. Pierrepont Moffat, Copies to Hull and Messersmith, March 16, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

“definite indication” from the Department about whether or not they could go along and support her plan that she laid out in *Foreign Affairs*. It seems that Moffat did not provide her with any more clarity during this conversation, instead he said he would bring the issue again to the attention of Hull and another new person, the Assistant Secretary, George Messersmith. This type of communication points to Thompson’s persistence, while also revealing the level of bureaucratic “red tape” and hurdles that existed within the State Department. The internal structure of the State Department mitigated against having one person or office who could deal with the problem that Thompson raised. Clearly Thompson could not acquire a straight answer from one person, she had to be bounced between multiple people who likely hoped that she would give up so that they would not have to conduct a full study of her suggested plan. Moffat ended the call attempting to assuage Thompson’s concerns by telling her that the State Department was acutely aware of the human suffering that would probably be caused by this newest refugee problem and held the same sympathies as she. However, referring to restrictive immigration laws, Moffat insisted that the situation was “bound up by legislation which of course govern the actions of any executive body, irrespective of its sympathies or wishes.” This warning indicates a problem that would plague the whole process moving forward; the State Department would work with Thompson but it was adamant that whatever solution may be created, it did not believe the plan could, or should, alter the current immigration legislation in the United States.

Two days later, during a March 18 cabinet meeting with FDR at the White House, the crisis of the *Anschluss* and the rapidly proliferating refugee problem was the topic of conversation. Describing the meeting in his diary, Jay Pierrepont Moffat noted that the

entire morning was devoted to discussing the news reports about German and Austrian Jews. Revealing Thompson's direct influence on the situation and his view of her as an outspoken and emotional woman, he wrote: "Groups in this country are becoming emotional to a degree and are advocating block legislation for the admittance of Austrians, or Jews, or whatever group their fancy hits upon. The self-appointed leader of this task is Dorothy Thompson who is definitely going to call together a group of people to see what can be done."⁴⁷ According to Moffat, the discussion of her public plan apparently caused significant fighting among State Department officials at this meeting, with some urging that the situation should be ignored and others fearing that failure to work with the Germans on the issue could invite them to "take a different path" for a solution to the Jewish question.⁴⁸ Receptive to this tense situation, its coverage in American news media, and Thompson's influence, at the cabinet meeting FDR raised the idea of taking in more "Austrian political refugees" like the country had done in 1848.⁴⁹ Although FDR suggested easing immigration restrictions based on the notion that the US "must not forget our great tradition of being the home of the exile and the outcast," his cabinet advised that due to public sentiment about foreigners, any legislative attempt to liberalize the immigration system and raise quotas would fail in congress.⁵⁰

During this meeting it was decided that some other avenue would be needed in order to appease Thompson and her army of sympathizers.⁵¹ Further revealing the

⁴⁷ Friday, March 19, 1938, Jay Pierrepont Moffat Diary Entry, (Box 11/folder 24), James G. McDonald Papers, USHMM.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ McDonald, *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald 1935-1945*, 122.

⁵⁰ Friday, March 19, 1938, Jay Pierrepont Moffat Diary Entry, (Box 11/folder 24), James G. McDonald papers, USHMM.

⁵¹ McDonald, *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald 1935-1945*, 122.

bureaucratic red tape that Thompson had witnessed a few days prior, State Department officials including Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, and Assistant Secretary George Messersmith advised FDR that it was best to “get out in front and attempt to guide their pressure, primarily with a view towards forestalling attempts to have the immigration laws liberalized.”⁵² They suggested that if the President instead take the initiative globally, “he could show that the United States was playing a leading role in trying to find a holistic solution to the refugee issue, and that the problem was not to be deposited onto any specific countries.”⁵³ This idea followed the outline of what Thompson had suggested in *Foreign Affairs* – encouraging certain countries to take in refugees while others financed the operation. However, it seems that this plan, when echoed through the cabinet officials, became a convenient way to appear to be taking major action, while in reality it would help safeguard restrictive American immigration. It is unclear whether Roosevelt truly agreed with his advisors or simply realized that this was perhaps the only feasible option, however limited it may be, for realistic action. As Henry Feingold aptly pointed out in his seminal work, *Politics of Rescue*, the FDR Administration was effectively “making a gesture to the image of America as a refuge for the oppressed but it was also carefully reassuring those who no longer held to such a belief.”⁵⁴

That same afternoon, George Messersmith met with representatives in the Department of Labor in order to discuss the possibility of working together to “explore whether, through the enlargement of the Refugee Office of the International Labor Office,

⁵² Perl, *The Holocaust Conspiracy*, 42-43 and Bartrop, *The Evian Conference of 1938 and the Jewish Refugee Crisis*, 14.

⁵³ Bartrop, *The Evian Conference of 1938 and the Jewish Refugee Crisis*, 13.

⁵⁴ Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue*, 23.

action might be taken to aid refugees.”⁵⁵ Messersmith noted that in light of the cabinet meeting decision, the State Department and the Department of Labor should send representatives to meet with Thompson and her other “prominent persons.” In the memorandum about this meeting Messersmith continued to maintain that it was the opinion of the State Department that despite the desires of the “persons who were disposed to believe that some far reaching change should be made to our immigration law and practice,” there was “no useful purpose” to such an action. It seems evident that from Thompson’s initial push to have the government consider her proposal, there was significant resistance to the notion that the United States had any particular responsibility to change its own policies.

Secretary Hull made this general course of action known to Thompson on March 19. He wrote to her expressing the cabinet’s decision to allow her to pursue some sort of solution to the refugee crisis. Hull assured her, “my associates and I fully share your views as to the seriousness of the refugee problem and are anxious to give what assistance is possible. While not in a position at this time to commit ourselves with respect to the plan you advocate in your *Foreign Affairs* article, I agree that it would be useful if someone from the State Department could meet with the group of citizens you suggest calling sometime next week to discuss various methods of constructive action.”⁵⁶ Thompson expressed appreciation to the State Department for taking her proposal seriously by writing back to Secretary Hull to say that she would be happy to meet with Department of State

⁵⁵ March 18 State Department Memorandum, approved by President March 22, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁵⁶ Telegram to Dorothy Thompson from Cordell Hull, March 19, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

and Department of Labor representatives and then conduct her conference with a group of prominent citizens.⁵⁷

Simultaneously, behind the scenes, the State Department and FDR worked to send preliminary interest inquiries about setting up an “official” solution to various countries. Following Thompson’s continued insistence that a “speedy, cooperative effort, under governmental supervision” was necessary to address the crisis, these telegrams proposed the basics of Thompson’s plan to seek official representatives for an international organization and for financing of emergency emigration to be undertaken by private organizations within each country.⁵⁸ However, consistent with the State Department’s line of thinking, evident from the White House cabinet meeting, the telegrams also explicitly assured that “no country would be expected or asked to receive a greater number of emigrants than is permitted by its existing legislation.”

On March 24, Hull sent a telegram response back to Thompson indicating a new level of seriousness with which the Department was regarding Thompson’s proposal for a new international organization. Hull informed her that, “we [The State Department and FDR] have been giving further thought to the refugee problem with a view to seeing whether we cannot work out some mechanism that will function more speedily and informally than the agencies we have been considering to date [the Department of Labor]. Such a mechanism would be additional to work being carried on by existing international agencies and should not in any sense be construed as discouraging or interfering with work

⁵⁷ Telegram to Cordell Hull from Dorothy Thompson, March 23, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁵⁸ Telegram to London from Department of State, March 23, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

by the latter.”⁵⁹ Hull suggested that Thompson hold off on her private meeting while the State Department investigated more official options. Thompson complied with this new directive and stated that she regarded anything “official as highly preferable.”⁶⁰

Later that day, a “Statement for the Press” was released by FDR and the Department of State. The statement was a public proposal for the creation of a new international body to discuss the refugee problem and to produce solutions for it. The press release stated: “This Government has become so impressed with the urgency of the problem of political refugees that it has inquired a number of Governments in Europe and in this hemisphere whether they would be willing to cooperate in setting up a special committee for the purpose of facilitating the emigration from Austria and presumably from Germany of political refugees...It should be understood that no country would be expected or asked to receive a greater number of immigrants than is permitted by its existing legislation.... It has been promoted to make this proposal because of the urgency of the problem with which the world is faced and the necessity of speedy cooperative effort under governmental supervision if widespread human suffering is to be averted.”⁶¹ Clearly this statement revealed that while Washington had been influenced by the pressure from Thompson and from her suggestion had decided to pursue more official action, the President’s public proposal was still not demanding that any country, including his own, be required to take

⁵⁹ Telegram to Dorothy Thompson from Cordell Hull, March 24, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP ; Breitman and Kraut, *American Refugee Policy*, 58, states that FDR did not want to use International Labor Organization and wanted to form a new organization instead.

⁶⁰ Telegram to Cordell Hull from Dorothy Thompson, March 25, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁶¹ Statement for Public by President and Hull, March 24, 1938, folder Jan-May 1938, OF3186, Political Refugees, FDR Library and “Statement for the Press” released by the Department of State, March 24, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

action. Nevertheless, Thompson wrote to George Messersmith on March 25, acknowledging that it was “good news” that the State Department had decided to “actually take some measures.” Thompson’s response also confirms that the State Department had decided to loosely follow her original plan because she suggested that they be in touch with “M Schlesinger,” the economist and close personal friend who had worked for the Nansen Committee, who “compelled” her to write the *Foreign Affairs* article and who was mentioned in it as being knowledgeable about Nazi cooperation.⁶²

Just as the President’s cabinet and the State Department had anticipated, other Americans were noticing that Dorothy Thompson’s campaign and vision to help Jewish refugees had created the need for a political response and were pleased to see that one was beginning to form. Positive letters poured into the State Department praising the recent press statement declaring that the government was taking initiative. For example, famous mathematicians Albert Einstein, James W. Alexander, Martson Morse, Oswald Veblen, and others wrote to Cordell Hull thanking him for his “generous initiative on behalf of the victims of the Nazi oppression in Austria and Germany.”⁶³ In addition, private citizens expressed their appreciation in a variety of ways, with some offering to help in their own smaller capacities. An ordinary citizen named Rose Sochet notified Cordell Hull that she thought the “movement to allow Jewish refugees from Germany to America is splendid”

⁶² Telegram to George Messersmith from Dorothy Thompson, March 25, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁶³ Telegram to Cordell Hull from Albert Einstein, James W Alexander, Martson Morse, Oswald Veblen, and others, March 26, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

and that she would “absolutely guarantee employment for 1 Jewish girl” upon the arrival of more refugees in the United States.⁶⁴

In addition to these positive reactions, private non-government correspondence following the FDR and the State Department’s announcement further highlights Dorothy Thompson’s prominent role in pushing for such action. For example, correspondence from Henry Montor from the Palcor News Agency to Hamilton Fisher Armstrong of *Foreign Affairs* (and one of Thompson’s close confidants), reveals that the informed public also believed that her journalistic campaign was effective at influencing the government’s decision. Montor wrote, “Dorothy Thompson’s article on the refugees in the April issue of *Foreign Affairs* is a renewed expression of the fine liberalism which has characterized her interpretation of European events. Undoubtedly her summary of the needs contributed to the proposal of the United States Government for an international committee to act upon the refugee situation.”⁶⁵ In the same letter, Montor, whose news career focused on “Palestine and the Near East” also suggested that while Thompson’s plan was admirable, she was not looking enough at Palestine as a viable option for Jewish refugees. This thought suggests that the solution for those trying to flee from the Nazis’ grasp was not clear and the various swirling opinions needed to be organized in such a way that would facilitate action. Thompson’s proposal was for an international governmental organization that used the *Haavara* model for those trying to emigrate to Palestine. Her idea was to take into

⁶⁴ Telegram to Cordell Hull from Calvert Publicity Co. Rose L Sochet, March 28 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁶⁵ Letter to Hamilton Fish Armstrong from Henry Montor, March 29, 1938, Hamilton Fish Armstrong Papers, 1983-1973, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President’s Advisory Committee, Jan - April 1938, Manuscripts Division, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University Library [Hereafter HFA Papers].

consideration the increasing number of potential refugees and the closing of Palestine's doors. Thompson had a keen awareness that other destinations needed to be considered, and that other nations needed to take some responsibility for this humanitarian crisis.

As laid out in her *Foreign Affairs* article, part of the reason Thompson pushed for an international governmental solution was because of the limited destination options for refugees. Thompson's keen awareness of this situation and the problem of general reluctance from individual countries to take in refugees is also evident from the negative reactions the State Department received after it took an official stance. Even though positive praise poured in, so did intense criticism to an equal degree. For example, on March 26 Cordell Hull received a telegram from Newton Jenkins, a Democratic candidate for the Senate from Illinois.⁶⁶ Jenkins "protest[ed] vigorously" against the government's announcement to take official action. He wrote that it would "flood our country with racial refugees from Austria and elsewhere we already have far too many of these racial elements and those already here have gained far more than their just share of power over American finance industry, radio, the press and the government itself they have far too much power in the State Department." This sentiment highlights virulent anti-immigrant and antisemitic feelings within the United States, signaling issues for the type of solution that could be obtained for European Jews. Jenkins belief that Jews has infiltrated the State Department also suggest that he, and likely other Americans, were relatively unaware of the State Department's own antisemitism and lack of diversity among its ranks.

⁶⁶ Telegram to Cordell Hull from Newton Jenkins, March 26, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

Jenkins did not stop there in this telegram. He further demonstrated blatant antisemitism by advocating for the American people to take note of Germany's success: "take our nation away from the elements which have seized it... that is what Hitler did in Germany." Jenkins told Hull that he should "emulate the example of the German Chancellor" to restore the United States. In other words, there were too many Jews already, more should not be allowed in and the American government should have no involvement in a solution to their crisis. Although Hull did not agree with this assessment, he continued to calm these types of fears by insisting that whatever solution is produced, no country, including the United States, would be expected to take more refugees.⁶⁷

Despite these early signs of potential barriers for a successful international solution, Thompson went full steam ahead, continuing her initiative to correspond with the State Department to further exert her influence behind the scenes. On March 29 Thompson received a note from George Messersmith acknowledging her March 25 telegram. He updated her about the State Department's efforts to contact other governments and their responses. He also assured her that while they were waiting for replies, the Department was considering all possibilities for what an international solution might look like. He told Thompson that as part of this they were certainly "keeping in mind [her] suggestion about Schleslinger" and they would also consider her list of Jewish, Catholic and Protestant organizations which might be of help.⁶⁸ Thompson had suggested the following groups⁶⁹:

⁶⁷ Reply Letter to Newton Jenkins, April 4, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁶⁸ Letter to Dorothy Thompson from George Messersmith, March 29, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁶⁹ Letter to George Messersmith from Dorothy Thompson, March 30, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

American Jewish Committee
Joint Distribution Committee
American Jewish Congress
American Organization through Rehabilitation Federation
National Coordinating Committee for Aid to Refugees and Emigrants Coming from
Germany
B'nai B'rith
Zionist Organization of America
Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society of America
Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America
United Methodist Council

After this follow-up with Messersmith, Thompson also sent along an unsolicited plan that she just so happened to have drawn up over the past week. Unsurprisingly she decided that the State Department would benefit from a clearly outlined directive from a person “at least partly responsible for launching this whole movement.” Before she sent her in-depth plan, she worried she was having a “katzenjammer” and “really overstepping [her] role.”⁷⁰ However she decided she had to continue to pressure the State Department because she was aware of her considerable power and would not be able to live with herself if she did anything less than “as much as [she] could.”⁷¹ Thompson felt pleased that she had spurred official action, but worried about the future of the initiative because she was “working [herself] into [her] grave.” She was “anxious” about the ability of others to implement an effective solution without “the whole thing blow[ing] up because of too improvised action.”⁷² With these thoughts in mind she sent Hull a detailed letter with

⁷⁰ Letter to George Messersmith from Dorothy Thompson, April 11, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Letter to George Messersmith from Dorothy Thompson, March 30, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

suggestions for what a successful international organization should look like. The information was also passed on to Messersmith and Sumner Welles.⁷³

Again acknowledging the press statement and its obvious alignment with what she had suggested in her public campaign, Thompson began the letter stating, “It was with the greatest pleasure and elation that I read your statement and that of the President, regarding the possibility of setting up an international action to aid political refugees.”⁷⁴ She used the letter to point out things “that ought to be avoided” regarding the setup and function of this new cooperative intergovernmental effort. She had six main points that she wanted to get across.

First, she wanted to “see an official international organization, of actual representatives of governments, to handle the whole question, backed, however, by a private advisory body and by private financial support.” She also maintained that before different countries could come together in a conference format, “a concrete plan and organization must exist prior to a conference, in order to set in motion the results of the conference.”⁷⁵ This first suggestion was honored with Roosevelt forming the President’s Advisory Committee on Political Refugees (PACOPR) which would be the private body to set the terms for an international conference to deal with the refugee crisis and to act as

⁷³ Letter to Cordell Hull from Dorothy Thompson, March 29, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP ; Note to George Messersmith from Sumner Welles, March 31, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁷⁴ Copy of Dorothy Thompson’s March 29 letter to Cordell Hull, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President’s Advisory Committee, Jan - April 1938, HFA Papers.

⁷⁵ Letter to Cordell Hull from Dorothy Thompson, March 29, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

a liaison between refugee organizations and the FDR administration. This conference would come to be known as the Evian Conference.

Second, Thompson thought that a “very clear program” needed to be formulated before representatives who were already working on the refugee problem, from Jewish groups and others, got together. She thought that this would avoid “jealousies, intrigues, questions of prestige, and so forth, which will endanger the whole project.” She stated that these “organizations have very conflicting views about the methods of handling the German Jewish refugee problem, and to attempt a program based on their various suggestions will, in my mind, create both unnecessary obstacles and great delay.” Thompson was very much aware of the differing voices weighing in on the issue and, because the refugee problem was only increasing, she was also keen to avoid disagreements and barriers that would slow down a solution.

Third, Thompson believed it would be best to bring in “quite fresh people” to this initiative who would be “prepared to back it up politically and financially.” Interestingly, she thought that the best method would be to “win the support of important individuals” rather than organizations, “for frequently individuals are bigger than organizations and you reach the organizations through the individuals rather than vice versa.” This sentiment reflects her own way of operating – the idea that knowing and working with influential people, and being one yourself, often produced more results. For this group of influential people Thompson suggested some American Jews “who have so far remained aloof” because they “have not been willing to put themselves in the foreground of any purely Jewish action.” She thought that the support of people such as Bernard Baruch, financier and advisor to FDR; Samuel Lewisohn, lawyer, financier and philanthropist; Arthur

Sulzberger, *New York Times* publisher; David Sarnoff, leader of Radio Corporation of America and National Broadcasting Company; Frank Altschul, financier and founder of Overbook Press; George Becker, translator and academic; and Albert Lasker, advertising executive, could be won if this was an “official” and “properly constructed” action.

Fourth, Thompson pointed out that the advisory and financial organization should also include “eminent and distinguished Gentiles of the sort whose names do not appear in every kind of public appeal and who have organizational brains and foreign contacts.” She suggested people such as Mr. Hamilton Fish Armstrong; W. H. Shepardson of the Council on Foreign Relations, who has excellent connections in England; young Nelson Rockefeller future governor of New York and Vice President of the US; and Reuben Clark LDS church leader and presidential advisor.

Fifth, Thompson made clear that “nobody should be in the forefront of this action who is personally exposed as an active enemy of any form of governmental system... nothing that comes from my pen will be regarded with anything except heavily prejudiced hostility by the Nazi Government.” It is evident from this that she was highly aware of her polarizing nature and enemy status in Nazi Germany. In this case, if the US government or an intergovernmental coalition wanted to eventually negotiate with the Nazi government, she thought her influence should continue to operate best behind the scenes.

Her last point was to emphasize that it must “be extremely clear what the purpose and the atmosphere of the action are to be. The conception that I had was of setting up an action of such scope and prestige that it could act as a diplomatic and financial service for political refugees, and that requires the diplomatic gift of capacity to compromise.” She wrote that the advisory organization must be willing to create constructive and concrete

plans and submit them to all governments, “including the totalitarian governments,” before an international conference was to be held. In Thompson’s mind this was a key issue because she feared that if a clear plan did not materialize before such a conference and if the governments creating this problem were excluded, it would not produce practical results for refugees. Using one of her many connections, Thompson again pointed out that her friend, Mr. Schlesinger, for many years an official of the German Foreign Office, and later one of the most vigorous and effective members of the Nansen Committee, and the Representative of the League of Nations for Refugees for fifteen years, thought that it would be possible for an organization to reach certain compromises with the Nazi Government. She wrote, “Mr. Schlesinger believes that it would be possible for the right kind of organization to persuade the German Government to use the capital of blocked marks, belonging to German and other Jews, as a means of quipping colonization projects.”

However, she concluded her letter voicing this fear:

Unless the action is very carefully planned, it will result in a lot of propaganda, raise many false hopes, and end up by being not much more than a Kellogg Pact for refugees...Resolutions, however generous, passed by the governments of the democratic powers will accomplish almost nothing. What is to be accomplished is to obtain the consent of particular governments to take particular refugees, with the backing of official government representatives and a corporation or organization to finance them. We need the establishment of an authoritative and continuous office.

This insight was correct, and unfortunately, what would materialize from the PACOPR would be in the spirit of Thompson’s vision, but practically it was too general and ill-conceived for any meaningful solutions to be carried out internationally.

On March 31, Messersmith replied to Thompson assuring her that they were taking her points seriously.⁷⁶ While the State Department consulted with the President about Thompson's detailed suggestions and how they would go about delivering this international organization that they had promised, Thompson continued her public campaign to aid the multiplying refugees. A day after she sent her lengthy letter to Cordell Hull, she and other prominent individuals sent out telegrams inviting prominent people to a refugee benefit concert. The concert at Carnegie Hall was to be held on April 27 and was intended to be a "symbol of America's good will and aid towards all Austrian refugees" and to "help dramatize a great and needful cause to the world and symbolize the support of the United States of the basic humanitarianism that has always been a traditional American characteristic."⁷⁷ Thompson headed a large sponsor committee for the concert and some members, namely friend and publisher Hamilton Fish Armstrong and Myron Taylor's wife, soon had connections to the plan for the President's international governmental organization.⁷⁸ Armstrong would serve on the PACOPR and Myron Taylor would be sent as the American representative at Evian. This shows how Thompson's activism for the refugees was sustained through multiple avenues of political and non-political action and, in addition, it highlights how these circles often overlapped because of Thompson's connections.

⁷⁶ Letter to Dorothy Thompson from George Messersmith, March 31, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁷⁷ Telegram to Hamilton Fish Armstrong from Dorothy Thompson, March 30, 1938, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President's Advisory Committee, Jan - April 1938, HFA Papers.

⁷⁸ "BENEFIT CONCERT APRIL 27: Heifetz and Rodzinski to Aid Austrian Refugees," *New York Times*, April 16, 1938.

While Thompson engaged in humanitarian activism in the public sphere, FDR and the State Department were formulating their action plan informed by Thompson's continued private suggestions. They took Thompson's advice to undertake a two-prong initiative: a private advisory committee to steer the direction of US involvement with an intergovernmental organization and the public proposal for an international conference of many governments to create a permanent organization. Official invitations for such a conference went out to select countries in late March and early April, however, disappointingly for Thompson's vision of a concrete plan that held countries accountable for action, the invites explicitly stated that "no country would be expected" to do anything if they attended.⁷⁹

The President's Advisory Committee and Path to the Evian Conference

More promising for Thompson's mission was that on March 31, Under Secretary Messersmith sent a report to Secretary of State Hull about the formation of an intergovernmental committee on refugees and an American committee (what was to become the PACOPR.)⁸⁰ The report mirrored many of the suggestions in Dorothy Thompson's letter from March 29, which Hull admitted had been a "very helpful and constructive" letter for "the setting up of an international action to aid political refugees."⁸¹

⁷⁹ Bartrop, *Evian Conference*, 15.

⁸⁰ Report by Under Secretary Messersmith to Secretary of State Hull on the Formation of an Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, March 31, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP and John Mendelsohn, *The Holocaust: Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes: Jewish Emigration from 1933 to the Evian Conference of 1938*, vol. 5 (New York : London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1982), 171.

⁸¹ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Cordell Hull, March 29, 1938, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President's Advisory Committee, Jan - April 1938, HFA Papers and Letter

After stating that initial responses to the invitation were “encouraging,” Messersmith also echoed Thompson’s fears about mishandling the situation, writing “there is great danger that if the matter is not handled carefully false hopes may be raised and that further demoralization instead of some constructive action may result.”⁸² Further, he also reported that he met with various Jewish representatives, such as Rabbi Stephen Wise, who also agreed that the activities of Jewish individuals and organizations “must be kept in the background” for this initiative to work.⁸³ Another suggestion practically lifted from Thompson’s proposal was the point that Roosevelt should invite to join the committee “persons instead of organizations.”⁸⁴ Messersmith attached a list of people who would potentially be interested in joining the President’s committee. Significantly the list included almost every name Thompson had mentioned, such as Nelson Rockefeller, Dr. Solomon Lowenstein, Frank Altschul, M. Schlesinger, David Sarnoff, Arthur Sulzberger, James G. McDonald, and Bernard Baruch. Unsurprisingly, the person at the end of Messersmith’s long list was “Miss Dorothy Thompson.” Another added piece of information in Messersmith’s report was the idea that there were a number of bills in the House and Senate looking to liberalize immigration practice and that the State Department’s present feeling was that hearings for such bills should be tabled given that this international committee was supposed to work on the refugee issue – further articulating the plan to make this an

to Dorothy Thompson from Cordell Hull, April 8, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP.

⁸² Report by Under Secretary Messersmith to Secretary of State Hull on the Formation of an Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, March 31, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP and Mendelsohn, *The Holocaust*, 171.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

international effort that would not actually necessitate immigration change for the United States.⁸⁵

On April 6, Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles wrote to President Roosevelt outlining the steps to take for the formation of an advisory committee (PACOPR) and asking for his approval to begin.⁸⁶ The enclosed memorandum requested that FDR select from a pre-determined list those who should attend an initial meeting of important interested persons at the White House. The people suggested included some who have been mentioned before such as Dorothy Thompson, Henry Morgenthau, and Bernard Baruch. This list also included: President of the Rockefeller Foundation, Raymond Fosdick; Chairman of the National Coordinating Committee, Co-founder of the German Jewish Children's Aid, and American representative to the Intergovernmental High Commission for Refugees Coming from Germany, Professor Joseph P. Chamberlain; former League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Coming from Germany, James G. McDonald; Reverend Samuel Cavert; Archbishop of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, Joseph F. Rummel, former head of the National Council of Catholic Men, Louis Kenedy. Next to each name in the memorandum, someone – likely FDR – put a checkmark. However, afterwards someone crossed out Dorothy Thompson's name. It is unclear who did it and exactly when it was done – although there are clues. In the copy of this memorandum held in FDR's papers, all the checkmarks exist,⁸⁷ but Thompson's name is not yet crossed out.

⁸⁵ Ibid ; Bartrop, *The Evian Conference*, 17.

⁸⁶ Letter to President Roosevelt from Sumner Welles outlining steps leading to the formation of an intergovernmental committee on refugees, April 6, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP and Mendelsohn, *The Holocaust*, 180.

⁸⁷ Copy of Letter from Sumner Welles to President Roosevelt outlining steps leading to the formation of an intergovernmental committee on refugees, April 6, 1938, Sumner Welles Papers, Box 150, Folder 1, Major Correspondence, Roosevelt, Franklin, April 1938, FDR Library.

In the copy located in the State Department files on refugees, the checkmarks are there and in addition, Thompson's name is now crossed out. Furthermore, someone scribbled "approved by FDR on April 8" on this State Department copy.⁸⁸ Her crossed out name might suggest that someone in the State Department took her own advice from her letter to Hull on March 29 – the notion that for fear of alienation, Thompson should not be publicly involved in the formation of this special committee.⁸⁹ An equally valid alternative explanation could be that someone in the State Department did not want Thompson to dictate this governmental initiative any more than she already had and, quite possibly, they wanted to remove the only woman proposed to sit on the committee.

No matter what the motivation behind disinviting Thompson to the initial meeting of supporters was, the framing of the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees and the international conference still followed the gist of Thompson's detailed proposal. For example, Messersmith's memorandum stated that the US government's view of how it could aid political refugees was through "the cooperation of all interested Governments" and not "any one country." However, while this was following Thompson's inclination that only an international solution could produce enough results, the other statements seemed to detract from the main mission of figuring out how to help more refugees. Messersmith also wrote that "in no event would commitments be taken outside of the framework of our present immigration laws and practices" and that the

⁸⁸ Letter from Sumner Welles to President Roosevelt outlining steps leading to the formation of an intergovernmental committee on refugees, April 6, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP and Mendelsohn, *The Holocaust*, 180.

⁸⁹ Report by Under Secretary Messersmith to Secretary of State Hull on the formation of an intergovernmental committee on refugees, March 31, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP and Mendelsohn, *The Holocaust*, 171.

representatives on the committee would make no promises, but rather follow “the instructions of this Government through the Department of State.” Interestingly, these two points, that the problem of aiding refugees must be solved by a cooperation of all interested governments and that the committee must act according to the Department of State and its desire not to increase immigration, had checkmarks next to them and these were the two main focuses that made their way into the Evian Conference.⁹⁰

Although Dorothy Thompson was not invited to the initial meeting and subsequently not offered an official place on the President’s advisory committee (it appears she would not have wanted this in any case), she did have significant ties to a number of those who did get tapped for this role – likely her own doing. For example, as she suggested, her close friend and editor, Hamilton Fish Armstrong, and another longtime friend concerned with refugee issues, James McDonald, were invited to join the PACOPR by FDR.⁹¹ Indeed, these men shared Thompson’s concern about the situation of Jewish refugees. McDonald had been a longtime personal friend and also he was the former League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and he declared for years that “only world action can save the Jews of Germany.”⁹² From looking at McDonald’s and Armstrong’s correspondence with Thompson it is clear that she was kept in the loop about

⁹⁰ Letter from Sumner Welles to President Roosevelt outlining steps leading to the formation of an intergovernmental committee on refugees, April 6, 1938, CDF, 1930-1939; M1284, roll 19, 840.48 Refugees / A-390 Mar. - June 1938, Record Group 59, NACP and Mendelsohn, *The Holocaust*, 180.

⁹¹ Telegram from FDR to James McDonald, April 8 1938, James McDonald Papers, (Box 32, Folder Franklin Roosevelt), University Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries [Hereafter JM Papers] and Letter from FDR to Hamilton Fish Armstrong, April 18, 1938, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President’s Advisory Committee, Jan - April 1938, HFA Papers.

⁹² *The American Hebrew*, January 3, 1936, National Weekly Journal of Jewish Affairs, Vol. 138, no.10, (Box 11, folder 1), James G. McDonald papers, USHMM.

the inner workings of this advisory committee and also influenced the committee's conversations through these connections even after she stepped back from a direct role.

The PACOPR was formed throughout April and had their first meeting at the Department of State on May 16, 1938.⁹³ The initial meeting was promising for what the upcoming international conference might accomplish – the members discussed how they must create a permanent organization to deal with the refugee problem and how each country would be expected to state the number of refugees they were willing to take.⁹⁴ Behind the scenes Hamilton Fish Armstrong worked to make sure Dorothy Thompson's specific vision would be considered. On May 19, he wrote to committee members insisting that they read Thompson's article "Refugees: A World Problem."⁹⁵ Various committee members replied, thanking Armstrong for providing this plan as the basis for their discussions.⁹⁶ This made sure that committee members were all on the same page about the extent of the refugee problem and the solution that was originally suggested. In subsequent meetings, Thompson's influence can also be seen. For example, during the meeting on May 25, the committee decided to have Armstrong ask Dr. Gustav Stolper (one of Thompson's close friends and members of her "brain trust" circle) to prepare a memorandum about his economic plan for handling the German and Austrian refugee problem. In addition, Armstrong was also supposed to consult with Schlesinger about his

⁹³ Minutes of the First Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, Monday, May 16, 1938, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President's Advisory Committee, May 1938, HFA Papers.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Letters to Paul Baerwald and Myron C. Taylor from Hamilton Fish Armstrong, May 20, 1938, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President's Advisory Committee, May 1938, HFA Papers.

⁹⁶ Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President's Advisory Committee, May 1938, HFA Papers.

financial plan for submission to the committee.⁹⁷ These were the plans that Thompson had closely drawn from for her initial public campaign writings. On June 13, Armstrong wrote to Thompson informing her of the committee's discussions of these plans.⁹⁸ From these letters it is evident that Thompson was continuously informed of the committee's happenings and her ideas seeped into the discussion.

While Thompson had a relationship with the committee, the PACOPR was just one prong of the refugee initiative and her influence was not felt as much at the actual international conference – the Evian Conference. For Evian, the representative committee sent by the US was headed by Myron C. Taylor, and James McDonald was sent as the advisor from the PACOPR.⁹⁹ Separate from the conference, the PACOPR remained intact to support any potential refugee initiatives related to the United States and soon Thompson would have another project to work on with it. However, the first initiative, the Evian Conference, while it followed the general vision Thompson had suggested and relayed to the State Department and the PACOPR, it did not yield substantial results to solve the refugee crisis.

The Evian Conference began on July 6, 1938 with thirty-two states in attendance.¹⁰⁰ It was supposed to form an international governmental organization to facilitate emigration for Jewish refugees. However, contrary to what Thompson wanted, the US representatives

⁹⁷ Minutes of the Meeting of the "Political" Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee on Political Refugees held at the Council on Foreign Relations, Wednesday, May 25, 1938, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President's Advisory Committee, May 1938, HFA Papers.

⁹⁸ Letter to Mrs. Sinclair Lewis, June 13, 1938, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President's Advisory Committee, June 1938, HFA Papers.

⁹⁹ Letter from James McDonald to Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, June 20, 1938, Box 31, folder Evian Conference 1938, JM Papers and McDonald, *Refugees and Rescue*, 123.

¹⁰⁰ Bartrop, *The Evian Conference*, 56.

went into the conference without outlining a *concrete* plan for such an organization and as the State Department had determined, all countries attending were not expected to take in refugees or loosen any existing quotas.¹⁰¹ This is not surprising considering that at this time, two-thirds of Americans disagreed with Roosevelt's policy and the Evian Conference, and seventy-two percent of the public remained opposed to more immigrants.¹⁰² Therefore, it has been argued that a full-scale solution was never truly intended by the US government.¹⁰³ Commentators such as William Shirer reporting from the Conference also "doubt[ed] if much [would] get done. The British, French, and Americans seem too anxious not to do anything to offend Hitler."¹⁰⁴ Essentially the Conference turned out to be an international spectacle to show concern for the refugees' plight, without insisting on international responsibility for easing their situation.

Despite this, there were two tangible outcomes of Evian. First, the refugee problem was officially recognized by the United States government and others in attendance, and second, it created the permanent "Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees" which was tasked with negotiating with the Third Reich to facilitate Jewish emigration and let refugees take property with them upon their exit. This committee was also supposed to find countries willing to take in refugees and organize financing of the operation.¹⁰⁵ These goals were similar to Thompson's original plan published in *Foreign Affairs*, but there was little funding behind them with no binding agreements to take in refugees. Soon the world would

¹⁰¹ Ibid, VII.

¹⁰² Rosen, *Saving the Jews*, 63.

¹⁰³ Bartrop, *The Evian Conference*.

¹⁰⁴ William L. Shirer, *Berlin diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent 1934-1941* (New York: AKnopf, 1941), 120.

¹⁰⁵ Bartrop, *The Evian Conference*, 100.

find out that the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees was set up to move much slower than the crisis necessitated.¹⁰⁶

Despite Thompson's hopes, the plan to negotiate with the Third Reich seems to have been futile from the beginning. Seemingly unbeknownst to the representatives at Evian and those who later formed the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, a document from the German Foreign Office to its embassies abroad insisted that cooperation with the Evian Conference and its results was not agreeable to the Nazi government.¹⁰⁷ The letter details how the Reich government felt that working with the other foreign governments to "deal with an internal German problem...is beyond discussion." Further, it clearly notes that "the question of whether Germany could facilitate the transfer of capital in Jewish hands must be answered in the negative, that a transfer of the capital Germany had accumulated by the Jews - especially after the war - could not be expected." The letter ends by stating that "any cooperation" with those "currently meeting in Evian is out of the question for Germany." While talks with the Nazi government would happen in the near future, it seems that there were strong negative feelings about any type of international refugee scheme from the outset.

Furthermore, the Nazi government publicly jumped on the spectacle of Evian and the perception of failure that accompanied it. In light of the fact that no countries immediately offered to take in Jewish refugees at the initial Conference, Hitler seized on the opportunity to spin this into propaganda that favored the Nazis' views. On July 13 the

¹⁰⁶ Zucker, Bat-Ami. *In Search of Refuge: Jews and US Consuls in Nazi Germany, 1933-1941* (London ; Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2001), 49.

¹⁰⁷ File 308/1305, Series 1, Reel 9, G 185, RG-67.023M, Letter from German Foreign Office to Embassies and Legations Abroad, 8, July, 1938, USHMM.

Voelkischer Beobachter's headline was the following: "NO ONE WANTS TO HAVE THEM / FRUITLESS DEBATES AT THE JEW-CONFERENCE IN EVIAN."¹⁰⁸ Later on, in Hitler's closing speech of the Nazi Party Rally of September 12, 1938, he argued that the Evian Conference revealed that Jews were also not wanted elsewhere in the world. He made a point of showing the hypocrisy of democratic countries who did not want the refugees, but who also bemoaned "the boundless cruelty" of Germany.¹⁰⁹ Of the Conference results he said, "there was no place for the Jews in their territory. So no help is given, but morality is saved."¹¹⁰ Some historians have gone as far as to point out that because of this propaganda the Evian Conference "was worse than just a total failure. It had exposed to the Germans the fact that they could go on with their persecution, the world did not care what Germany did to the Jews."¹¹¹ The evaluation that the Conference produced nothing of note is a tad extreme since the Conference did create a permanent international infrastructure and plan for negotiations with the Third Reich. However, the sentiment about what the Conference accomplished for the Nazi mind is quite valid and this narrative reflected poorly on the democracies.

For many liberals in the United States the hope was for the Evian Conference to achieve a practical solution that would show that the world cared for the Jewish refugees. No one wished for this outcome more than Dorothy Thompson. Despite her continued efforts behind the scenes of the Conference's creation and in the discussions of the PACOPR, Thompson admitted that the Evian Conference was a great disappointment and

¹⁰⁸ Bartrop, *The Evian Conference*, 101.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Perl, *Holocaust Conspiracy*, 49.

did not meet the intended goals. Many government officials believed that the Conference and its limited outcome were enough to appease American liberals on the refugee issue. However, as the situation for Jews under German control worsened in the coming months and as the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees did not produce quick results, Thompson, always consistent with her mission, continued to criticize the lack of political action taken among the democratic nations. Feeling that the international solution had become too unattainable for bureaucratic reasons and the anti-immigrant sentiment, she continued to “do as much as she could,” but this time she focused her efforts in the arena of non-governmental humanitarian action.

CHAPTER 5: AVENUES OF ACTIVISM AND THE CRISIS OF 1938: KRISTALLNACHT AND PERSONAL AID

After Evian, the newly incorporated Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, in cooperation with the PACOPR, dragged its feet to provide solutions and the refugee problem only intensified. In the Fall of 1938, the refugee crisis was further exacerbated by the violent events of *Kristallnacht*. On Monday November 7, 1938, a seventeen year old Jewish boy named Herschel Grynszpan fatally shot Ernst vom Rath, a German embassy official in Paris.¹ Grynszpan had committed this assassination after being notified that his parents, Polish Jews who had been residents in Germany since 1911, were expelled from the Reich with thousands of other Eastern European Jews. These Polish Jews were stranded in a refugee camp between Germany and Poland, and Grynszpan decided to take revenge for his family's predicament. Before the shooting Grynszpan wrote to a Parisian uncle, "My heart bleeds when I think of our tragedy and that of the 12,000 Jews. I have to protest in a way that the whole world hears my protest, and this I intend to do. I beg your forgiveness."² Vom Rath died from his wounds two days after the shooting, offering an excuse for Nazi-induced cruelty. In the aftermath of anti-Jewish violence on November 9 and 10, the Nazi party attributed the pogroms to widespread anger about the assassination of vom Rath. In the immediate aftermath of this heightened violence toward Jews, the International Committee on Refugees and the PACOPR struggled to quickly provide a

¹ Gerald Schwab, *The Day the Holocaust Began: The Odyssey of Herschel Grynszpan* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 1.

² Friedländer, *The Years of Persecution*, 268.

solution and had a difficult time negotiating with the Nazi government. As this official avenue of rescue did not appear promising, Dorothy Thompson once again seized on the opportunity to publicly champion the refugee cause – this time she focused her energy into creating a private citizens’ initiative without government affiliation through efforts such as congressional testimony, individual sponsorship of refugees, and even another artistic appeal to inspire American aid.

Herschel Grynszpan, Kristallnacht, and the Journalists’ Defense Fund

During the months leading up to *Kristallnacht* the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees and the PACOPR continued to meet to facilitate Thompson’s proposed solution of negotiating with the Nazis to let Jewish refugees leave the Reich and travel to countries willing to take them in if they brought financial assets with them. These meetings were lengthy and focused on getting countries to agree to take in refugees while reviewing financial plans from Schlesinger and others.³ However, by November the outlook for this solution appeared grim. James McDonald and Hamilton Fish Armstrong, who were from the PACOPR and worked with Myron Taylor on the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, met with FDR to inform him that the “initiative of last March had bogged down and was no longer in our hands... the possibility of negotiating with the Germans was now so remote as to be discarded and we were in a vicious circle where we could not find homes for the refugees until we had money, and at the same time we could not get money until

³ Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President’s Advisory Committee, July - December 1938, HFA Papers.

we had a plan for finding homes.”⁴ Clearly any comprehensive solution was not close to fruition.

About a week later, Myron C. Taylor, the American representative for the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, delivered a radio address reporting that the Committee in London was working on solutions after *Kristallnacht*, but that they were not “quick solutions” as they were attempting to “prevent the flooding” of refugees.⁵ Taylor’s comments were accurate, as the PACOPR and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees took months on a response. By December it appeared as if the Nazi government might enter into talks with the Intergovernmental Committee, however, these discussions did not go smoothly.⁶ By April 1939, the Intergovernmental Committee had been given somewhat of an ultimatum by Goering who insisted that they had six months to “come to an understanding with outside Jewry, and that if nothing had happened by the end of that time the authorities would chart another course.”⁷ During a PACOPR meeting with FDR, a telegram from Raymond Herman Geist, stationed at the US embassy in Berlin, revealed the fear that “unless places of settlement were opened up very shortly the radicals would again gain control in Germany and try to solve the Jewish problem in their own way.”⁸ While FDR was of the opinion that the Intergovernmental Committee needed to start acting

⁴ November 15, 1938, Jay Pierrepont Moffat Diary Entry, (Box 11/folder 24), James G. McDonald Papers, USHMM.

⁵ The Importance of the Refugee Problem Radio Address by the Honorable Myron C. Taylor, Nov 25, 1938, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, Foreign Affairs - President’s Advisory Committee, July - December 1938, HFA Papers.

⁶ November 15, 1938, Jay Pierrepont Moffat Diary Entry, (Box 11/folder 24), James G. McDonald Papers, USHMM.

⁷ Saturday and Sunday, April 22 and 23, 1939, Jay Pierrepont Moffat Diary Entry, (Box 11/folder 24), James G. McDonald papers, USHMM.

⁸ Ibid.

with much haste, as a result of not finding enough settlement options and the Nazis' increasing reluctance to cooperate with the Committee, no solution materialized and the PACOPR and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees came to a standstill.⁹ As a result, thousands of Jews clamoring to escape increasing restrictions and violence still remained within Nazi grasp.

While the “official” avenues established to help Jewish refugees exit Germany were bogged down in unproductive negotiation without a clear international solution in sight, Dorothy Thompson provided another new campaign – this time she had a more emotional and productive response to the chaos of *Kristallnacht*. When Herschel Grynzspan shot vom Rath, Thompson emphasized the human desperation behind his act and used it to rally her audience to sympathize for and aid Jewish refugees. Thompson had become increasingly disillusioned with the disappointing results of the “official” work of the PACOPR and the Intergovernmental Committee. Again, recognizing that a new approach was needed to champion the refugee cause, she began another public campaign that pulled at the heartstrings and this time demanded public, non-political, citizen action.

This Grynzspan incident and its aftermath attracted an abundance of international attention, offering the perfect opportunity for Thompson to renew the concern for her refugee cause. Thompson proved to be one of the very few who supported Grynzspan from the beginning and she was determined to tell the world his side of the story. In her column Thompson wrote:

I feel as though I know that boy, for in the past five years I have met so many whose story is the same...Herschel Grynzspan was one of the hundreds of thousands of refugees from whom the terror east of the Rhine has turned loose on the world. His

⁹ July 1939, Jay Pierrepont Moffat Diary Entry, (Box 11/folder 24), James G. McDonald Papers, USHMM.

permit to stay in Paris had expired. He could not leave France, for no country would take him in...Herschel read the newspapers and all that he could read filled him with dark anxiety and wild despair...Thousands of men and women of his race had killed themselves in the last years, rather than live like hunted animals... The, a few days ago, he got a letter from his father. His father told him that he had been summoned from his bed and herded with thousands of others into a train of box cars, and shipped over the border, into Poland. He had not been allowed to take any of his meager savings with him. Just fifty cents. 'I am penniless' he told his son...This was the end. Herschel fingered his pistol and thought: Why doesn't someone do something! Why must we be chased around the earth like animals!... Herschel thought about the people involved in the creation of this terror...And so Herschel walked into the German embassy and shot Herr vom Rath....Herr vom Rath died on Wednesday. And on Thursday every Jew in Germany was held responsible for this boy's deed...In Paris, a boy who had hoped to make some gesture of protest which would call attention to the wrongs done his race burst into hysterical sobs... He had been prepared to pay for his deed with his own life. Now he realized that half a million of his fellows had been sentenced to extinction because of his deed. I am speaking of this boy. Soon he will go on trial.... They say he will go to the guillotine, without a trial by jury without the rights that any common murderer has.... Who is on trial in this case? I say we are all on trial. I say the Christian world is on trial...If any Jews, anywhere in the world protest at anything that is happening, further oppressive measures will be taken...Therefore, we who are not Jews must speak, speak our sorrow and indignation and disgust in so many voices that they will be heard... ¹⁰

Thompson reminded her audience that the survival of German and Austrian Jews depended on how the world responded. Even the world Jewish community steered clear of supporting Grynszpan's violent act, in an understandable hope of self-preservation. Thompson noted this, saying "The Nazis government has announced that if any Jews, anywhere in the world, protest at anything that is happening, further oppressive measures will be taken."¹¹

In addition to her column, Thompson devoted significant radio time to speaking about Grynszpan's tragic story. On the evening of November 14 Thompson made one of

¹⁰ Thompson, *Let the Record Speak*, 230-31.

¹¹ Jonathan Kirsch, *The Short, Strange Life of Herschel Grynszpan: A Boy Avenger, a Nazi Diplomat, and a Murder in Paris* (New York: Liveright Pub, 2013), 149 and "Dorothy Thompson Appeals for Youth," *Bnai Brith Messenger*, Friday, November 18, 1938.

her regular broadcasts on the “General Electric Hour” to an estimated five million listeners.¹² Thompson used Grynzspan’s case to argue that this was the first of many “provok[ed] incidents which will give [Hitler’s] regime an excuse to take the measures which they have already planned.”¹³ To broaden this narrative she published numerous articles emphasizing that “it will be a great mistake to regard what is happening in Germany as primarily a Jewish matter.”¹⁴ With creative “On the Record” articles such as one designed as a letter titled “To a Jewish Friend,” she specifically begged Jews not to “isolate [themselves] in a fierce and bitter pride...The crisis is not a Jewish crisis. It is a human crisis.”¹⁵ Her loathing of the Nazis’ racist worldview led her to champion the idea that this ordeal was a world problem, and an American problem, rather than simply a Jewish problem. Jewish newspapers lauded the efforts to “mobilize Christian support for the defense of Herschel Grynzspan.”¹⁶ Thompson felt that it was her mission to make sure the entirety of the American public was not left in the dark and she asked them to write to her with their opinions.¹⁷ Three hours after she went off the air, she received more than 2,000 telegrams from people who identified as Christian expressing their deep concern and pledging aid.¹⁸

¹² Schwab, *The Day the Holocaust Began*, 35.

¹³ Edited manuscript calling for donations to Journalists’ Defense Fund for Herschel Grynzspan, 1938 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

¹⁴ Clipped “On the Record” column titled *Inside Germany*, 23 November 1939, “On the Record” Published Copies 1938 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 96, DT Papers.

¹⁵ “To a Jewish Friend” article, 14 November 1938, On the Record (published copies) 1938 folder, box 96, DT Papers.

¹⁶ “Dorothy Thompson Appeals for Youth,” *Bnai Brith Messenger*, Friday, November 18, 1938.

¹⁷ “Thousands in U. S. Offer to Help Assassin; Dorothy Thompson Forms Defense Fund,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1938.

¹⁸ “Dorothy Thompson Appeals for Youth,” *Bnai Brith Messenger*, Friday, November 18, 1938.

Thompson's strategy to emotionally captivate, as well as rationalize her argument for aiding refugees, was important for her audiences and drew attention from some Nazi officials as well. In Fall 1938, Thompson's Sunday evening broadcasts on the NBC Red Network were being listened to by over five million Americans. Joseph Goebbels commented on Thompson's public outcries in his diary, "It is humiliating and irritating that such idiotic females, whose brains can consist of only straw... have the right to speak at all in public against a historic figure of the greatness of the Fuehrer."¹⁹ Thompson's insistent reporting was certainly noticed by her enemies.

Her reports were also acknowledged by her influential friends. Following the initial reports about Grynspan, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a private letter to Dorothy Thompson on November 8th, saying:

I read your column with interest and on the European situation I frequently feel as you do...I will gladly see what I can do to prevent cruelty to people anywhere! The world seems to have gone completely mad as far as disregard for human beings goes.²⁰

However, Thompson was not satisfied with remarks of sympathy without action. After violence ensued, she wrote "The complacent west, the leaders of liberal democracy... must confront critical choices... take a last stand against heavy odds or go under for generations."²¹

On November 16, the week after *Kristallnacht*, citizens of conscience petitioned FDR to take a stand against Nazi Germany. A group of thirty-six prominent American

¹⁹ Kirsch, *The Short, Strange Life of Herschel Grynszpan*, 148.

²⁰ Letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to Dorothy Thompson, 8 November 1938, Eleanor Roosevelt folder, incoming correspondence, box 24, DT Papers.

²¹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 2, 1933-1938*, 500.

writers, including Thompson, sent a telegram to FDR that called out the government's continued inaction. It said:

We feel we no longer have any right to remain silent. We feel that the American people and the American government have no right to remain silent. While a German government celebrates each of its shocking victories in the international field by the increasingly inhuman oppression of those whose only crime is that they are at the government's mercy.... Thirty-five years ago, a horrified America rose to its feet to protest against the Kishinev pogroms in Tsarist Russia. God help us if we have grown so indifferent to human suffering that we cannot rise now in protest against the pogroms of Nazi Germany. We do not believe we have grown so indifferent and we do not think the world should be allowed to think we have. We feel that it is deeply immoral for the American people to continue having economic relations with a government that avowedly uses mass murder to solve its economic problems. We ask you to sever trade relations with Nazi Germany. To declare an embargo on all Nazi German goods.²²

Unfortunately, the writers did not get what they asked for. FDR remained virtually silent on *Kristallnacht* and there was no change in trade relations with Germany – the government stayed the course with the official policies coming out of the PACOPR and the Intergovernmental Committee.²³ However, FDR did allow Germans with temporary visas in the United States remain past their expiration, but for those still overseas the chance of refuge remained slim. The daily situation of German Jews in late 1938 was dismal, “early in the morning, Jews appear at travel agencies and stand in long lines waiting to ask what visas one can obtain that day.”²⁴

Even if official action to condemn Germany and aid refugees was limited, Thompson's journalistic commentary on *Kristallnacht* had an influence on some regular American citizens; an inpouring of more than 3,000 telegrams, hundreds of uncounted

²² Telegram from 36 American Writers to President Roosevelt, 11/16/1938, Series: Central Decimal Files, 1910 – 1963, File Unit: 862.4016, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, NACP.

²³ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 2, 1933-1938*, 570.

²⁴ Friedländer, *The Years of Persecution*, 317.

letters from her readers and listeners, and money from forty-six states shows that this campaign inspired grassroots action against Nazi cruelty.²⁵ Without being asked, hundreds sent money in hopes that it could help young Grynszpan. Thompson then made an announcement: “The response to my broadcast was so phenomenal that I find myself directing the collection of a fund for the defense of Herschel Grynszpan.”²⁶ Because she inspired many Americans to take a small step toward action with donation, Thompson officially started the Journalist’s Defense Fund, declaring it a collection “from the American people, as a demonstration of our will to support justice, secure a fair trial, to provide for a first rate and adequate defense, and bring out the underlying facts.”²⁷ The funds that were “not needed for the case itself would be distributed to credible organizations looking after the interests of the victims of Hitler.”²⁸ Following her multiple broadcasts and columns on the subject, over \$40,000 dollars was spontaneously contributed by non-Jewish Americans.²⁹ This amounts to roughly \$732,540 in today’s world.³⁰ After Thompson created the fund, the committee decided to specifically ask for donations from Christians to further emphasize how the injustice toward Grynszpan’s family and the *Kristallnacht* pogrom was not just a Jewish outrage, it was an assault on the western world. Further, she wanted the organization to be free from the common trope that it was “another

²⁵ Kirsch, *The Short, Strange Life of Herschel Grynszpan*, 150 and Gerald Schwab, *The Day the Holocaust Began: The Odyssey of Herschel Grynszpan* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 39.

²⁶ Edited manuscript calling for donations to Journalists’ Defense Fund for Herschel Grynszpan, 1938 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to the City Editor, International News Service, 20 May 1941, May-August 1941 Folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

²⁹ Thompson, *Let the Record Speak*, 231.

³⁰ “CPI Inflation Calculator,” accessed June 2, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

Jewish plot.”³¹ This was the same message that Thompson constantly echoed in her journalism.³²

The Journalists’ Defense Fund gathered support from many prominent journalists and vocal anti-Nazi spokespeople who were also Thompson’s personal friends. Those involved included PACOPR member and *Foreign Affairs* editor Hamilton Fish Armstrong, newspaper columnist Heywood Broun, journalist John Gunther, Brigadier general and newspaper columnist Hugh S. Johnson, journalist Leland Stowe, print and broadcast journalist Raymond Gram Swing, newspaper editor William Allen White, novelist Louis Bromfield, actor Edward G. Robinson, novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, journalist Westbrook Pegler, commentator for *The New Yorker* magazine and actor Alexander Woollcott, and writer and socialist Alice Roosevelt Longworth.³³ On November 19, Edgar Mowrer, head of the European Bureau of the *Chicago Daily News*, and the French journalist Andre Geraud were employed by Thompson to help coordinate a defense team in France. On November 19, Mowrer wrote to Thompson that Vincent de Moro-Giafferi, the attorney who accepted the defense of Grynszpan,³⁴ “is one of the big shots and will do a good job and manage to put Hitler in the prisoner’s dock.”³⁵ In a later letter Mowrer also told Thompson that he “expect[s] and hope[s]” the Grynszpan case can be a “really great attack

³¹ Schwab, *The Day the Holocaust Began*, 39.

³² Letter from A. H. Leviero of the NY Times to Dorothy Thompson, 13 December 1938, New York N-Nich 18 Dec 1938-27 Aug 1958 folder, incoming correspondence, box 21, DT Papers.

³³ Schwab, *The Day the Holocaust Began*, 39-40.

³⁴ Vincent de Moro-Giafferi was the number one criminal defense attorney in France and a known anti-fascist. See interview with Gerald Schwab November 18, 1997, RG-50.106.0082, USHMM.

³⁵ Letter from Edgar Mowrer to Dorothy Thompson, 19 November 1938, Mowrer, Edgar Ansel folder, incoming correspondence, box 20, DT Papers.

on the Nazis.”³⁶ The mission of the Journalists’ Defense Fund to provide an adequate trial for Grynszpan and raise refugee aid from outraged Americans, highlights the belief that democratic law and humanitarian initiatives could potentially still prevail. Unfortunately, this would not hold true for Grynszpan.

The Journalists’ Defense Fund members decided that about \$5,000 of the fund should be sent to France to finance the investigation and trial proceedings. Over the next year the defense team argued over the best way to present their case, fearing that if they focused on Grynszpan’s act as a political assassination it would cause more suffering for Jews living under the Nazis.³⁷ Ultimately, in September 1940, Thompson was informed that Moro-Giafferi was unable to take the case to trial due to the war and Grynszpan’s whereabouts were unknown following the fall of France in June.³⁸

Though the Journalists’ Defense Fund was unable to attain justice for Grynszpan, it *was* able to donate the majority of its funds to refugee organizations to aid the victims of Nazi Germany. The group chose “a well-balanced distribution, covering children, students, artists, a church group, and emigres who are interested in helping other refugees to become adjusted to American ways of life.”³⁹ The distribution of the fund’s money was as follows:

- \$5,346.08 - Organizational costs and money sent to Paris for defense team
- \$5,250.00 - American Guild for German Cultural Freedom
- \$5,000 - Catholic Committee for Refugees from Germany
- \$5,000 - Intercollegiate Committee to Aid Student Refugees
- \$5,000 - Self-Help for German Emigres, Inc.
- \$2,500 - German Jewish Children’s Aid

³⁶ Letter from Edgar Mowrer to Dorothy Thompson, 20 January 1939, Mowrer, Edgar Ansel folder, incoming correspondence, box 20, DT Papers.

³⁷ Schwab, *The Day the Holocaust Began*, 95.

³⁸ Letter from Mr. C. C. Hemenway to Dorothy Thompson, 27 September 1940, July-Dec 1940 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

³⁹ Letter from Leggett Brown to Dorothy Thompson, 15 March 1939, incoming correspondence J folder, incoming correspondence, box 14, DT Papers.

\$2,500 - American Friends Service Committee
\$2,500 - To Thomas Mann for refugee help [distributed to individual people in the United States, France, and neutral European countries]
\$1,000 - Loyal Americans of German Descent ⁴⁰

Waiting to learn of his fate, the fund still had a portion of money set aside for Grynszpan.⁴¹

According to many appreciative letters written back to the Journalists' Defense Committee and to Dorothy Thompson, the funding was absolutely necessary and helped a variety of refugee scenarios. The American Guild for German Cultural Freedom, which later had to disband because of a lack of funding, used the Journalists' Defense Fund donation "to save... lives, secure visas, and steamship tickets to Mexico, Latin America, and other parts of the world open to refugees for really distinguished writers and artists."⁴²

In January 1939, Ingrid Warburg, Jewish refugee advocate and niece to the German-American banker and philanthropist Felix Warburg,⁴³ wrote to Thompson thanking her for help with the Intercollegiate Committee for Student Refugees. She said the funds had drawn the attention of many more universities, resulting in more sponsorships for refugee students.⁴⁴ A few months later Warburg wrote again to tell Thompson that the money provided to both the German Jewish Children's Aid and the Progressive School's Committee for Refugee Children was matched by the Rosenwald Fund for another \$5,000. Warburg said that it was very encouraging for their work and that "the only thing [they] need now are the student visas." She concluded by writing, "the most important factor is

⁴⁰ Draft of press statement, May-August 1941, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

⁴¹ Letter from Mr. C. C. Hemenway to Dorothy Thompson, 27 September 1940, July-Dec 1940 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

⁴² Draft of press statement, May-August 1941 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

⁴³ For information on the prominent Warburg family, see Ron Chernow, *The Warburgs: The Twentieth-Century Odyssey of a Remarkable Jewish Family* (New York: Random House, 1993).

⁴⁴ Letter from Ingrid Warburg to Dorothy Thompson, 9 January 1939, Wad-War folder, incoming correspondence, box 32, DT Papers.

the money for the children and you can be sure that it will be used in the best way.”⁴⁵ On March 23, 1939, Toni Stolper,⁴⁶ a friend and Jewish refugee whom Thompson had personally aided in immigrating to America, wrote to the Fund on behalf of her organization Self-Help For Refugees. She stated,

Already today it has become possible for us by your help to solve a few urgent cases which we could not tackle yesterday because our funds were almost exhausted by the rising emergency. These cases concern families who are in immediate danger in Germany and who have themselves prepared their emigration overseas, but are unable to find the few hundred dollars necessary as show money in the new countries. In these cases which we carefully check in every detail we are able to save families immediately by granting between \$50. – to \$200. – a family.⁴⁷

In May 1941, after being fairly sure of Grynszpan’s capture by the Gestapo, Thompson arranged to have the rest of the Journalists’ Defense Fund money sent to the Foster Parents’ Plan for War Children, Inc. to be specifically used for the Hampstead Nurseries founded and run in London by Anna Freud, daughter of psycho-analyst founder and Thompson’s old friend, Sigmund Freud, and a refugee herself.⁴⁸ These nurseries cared for more than eighty children affected by war-torn Europe. Later on, the nurseries also received orphans from the Theresienstadt concentration camp and Anna Freud published a series of observational studies from the Nursery work with a focus on the effects of stress on children and changes in attachment forming in absence of parents, a study created from war tragedies. One of the Journalists’ Defense Committee’s final press statements

⁴⁵ Letter from Ingrid Warburg to Dorothy Thompson, 3 April 1939, Wad-War folder, incoming correspondence, box 32, DT Papers.

⁴⁶ Toni Stolper was an economist and journalist as was her husband Gustav. The family fled Berlin to the US in 1933 and their papers are located at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, NY.

⁴⁷ Letter from Toni Stolper to the Journalists’ Defense Fund, 23 March 1939, Spe-Str folder, incoming correspondence, box 26, DT Papers.

⁴⁸ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to the Guaranty Trust Company, 22 May 1942, May-August 1941 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

announced, “The tragic affair of Herschel Grynszpan has through this fund contributed to saving the lives of hundreds of men, women, and children and numerous gifted artists and writers, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish.”⁴⁹ The responses from the organizations that the Journalists’ Defense Fund supported shows how an outpouring of American aid truly mattered to individual lives. Thompson’s courageous voice had convinced some people to act, resulting in sustained avenues of refuge through private organizations. Compared to the official action being taken by the PACOPR and the Intergovernmental Committee, Thompson’s public philanthropic initiative was tangibly more successful at helping meet the mounting needs of Jewish refugees after *Kristallnacht*.

In the Spring of 1939 Thompson had another chance to influence political action over refugees. On February 9, 1939, Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts introduced a resolution calling for legislation to permit the entry of 20,000 children under the age of 14 from German occupied territory each year during 1939 and 1940 in excess of the existing quota laws.⁵⁰ This legislation, known as the Wagner-Rogers Bill, was debated in Congress throughout the spring and Thompson traveled to Washington DC to endorse the bill in hopes of helping it pass.⁵¹ While the bill ultimately failed to reach the stage of Congressional vote during the

⁴⁹ Draft of press statement, May-August 1941 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

⁵⁰ Judith Taylor Baumel, “The Jewish Refugee Children from Europe in the Eyes of the American Press and Public Opinion 1934-1945.” *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 5, no. 4 (December 1990): 297.

⁵¹ Admission of German refugee children. Joint hearings before a subcommittee of the Committee on immigration, United States Senate, and a subcommittee of the Committee on immigration and naturalization, House of representatives, Seventy-sixth Congress, first session, on S.J. Res. 64 and H.J. Res. 168, joint resolutions to authorize the admission into the United States of a limited number of German refugee children. April 20, 21, 22, and 24, 1939. Corporate Author: United States. Published: Washington, U.S. Govt. print. off., 1939. STATEMENT OF MISS DOROTHY THOMPSON [Hereafter Statement of Miss Dorothy Thompson].

summer of 1939,⁵² Thompson's testimony at the committee's hearing in late April reveals her varied efforts on behalf of refugees after Evian and *Kristallnacht*, and in addition, protests against her endorsement further highlight the fierce anti-immigration and anti-semitic atmosphere she was up against when trying to achieve change at the governmental policy level.

Thompson began her statement before the joint hearing by saying that she was speaking for and representing no one but herself. She then explained her ongoing campaign for Jewish refugees that started more than a year beforehand with her *Foreign Affairs* article. She acknowledged that her campaign was "instrumental in bringing about the Evian Conference," but also admitted that this had not produced encouraging results.⁵³ Because the US had called the Evian Conference and promised to do something for refugees, she argued that this bill was "only a very small contribution that America would be making, a very little segment of a very great problem. It seems to me it is the most intelligent contribution you could make, and is not only an act of humanity and justice but will do us a good deal of good."⁵⁴ She insisted that allowing these children into the country was not only the right thing to do, but also politically necessary. Thompson was very much aware of how the Nazis had interpreted the Evian Conference in their propaganda. She warned that if the United States passed up yet another avenue of action, the nation would seem hypocritical. When asked what effect Congress's answer to the bill would have, Thompson echoed what the world had said after the disappointment of Evian, stating: "the worst

⁵² Baumel, "The Jewish Refugee Children," 300.

⁵³ Statement of Miss Dorothy Thompson, 160.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

possible propaganda would be for the greatest democracy on earth to refuse to do anything about this terrific international problem.”⁵⁵

As she had done in her journalistic campaigns Thompson also told the senators and representatives a number of personal horror stories to garner sympathy for the refugees. She shared a recent letter she had received from an anonymous German woman that explained the dire situation. The woman wrote:

Dear Mrs. Thompson: We have heard on the radio (Luxemburg) how hard you are trying to help the unfortunate victims of the latest action in Germany. Please allow us to write you on behalf of the persecuted Jews in Germany.... Help must come soon. You have no idea how horrible it all is. People driven from their homes in the dead of night, crying children, white-haired helpless old folks all trembling, imploring us to help to get a chance to escape from this hell. Please, please, go on trying all you can. I am only a German (Aryan) woman working in an office. But I have managed to come across to France to write you this letter.... I know you could help. They listen to you.⁵⁶

Thompson also spoke about a little boy she knew who had threatened to drown himself in a lake if he had to stay in Europe and also the difficult decisions for many parents who were willing to give up their children to ensure their safety.⁵⁷ She hoped that these desperate stories would influence the committee to approve the bill in order to help a fraction of innocent children.

More than this, Thompson also assured the committee that there were already a number of places for the children to go upon their arrival. For example, Thompson had contacted a large institution in Chicago who agreed to find homes for refugee children. At the time Thompson was speaking, the institution already had a waiting list of over 2,000

⁵⁵ Ibid, 164-65.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 161.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 163.

families willing to take in the children.⁵⁸ Despite her well-articulated testimony and the solution Thompson already had for housing many children, members of the committee questioned her persistently and others testified strongly against her position. From the congressmen she faced questions about whether allowing refugee children in the country would “take away food from the mouths of American children,” whether this bill could help children who were not Jewish, and if the government could lower the quota for adults if they took these extra children.⁵⁹ Thompson challenged each question, stressing the importance of taking action based on humanitarian principle and most importantly, because the US had called the Evian Conference and now the world was watching and waiting for something to be done.

While Thompson’s points seem to have swayed at least two representatives in favor of the bill,⁶⁰ the testimony of other women harshly criticized the Wagner-Rogers Bill and specifically called out Thompson’s statement. Far-right leader of “The Mothers of America,” Mrs. Agnes Waters, frequently protested “liberal” bills that she believed benefitted America’s “common enemy,” Jews and African-Americans.⁶¹ Waters was staunchly against the Wagner-Rogers Bill because as many others who feared Jewish immigrants believed, she thought that these refugees would ruin the country and put “true” Americans in jeopardy. She testified that these refugees “could never become loyal

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 164-65.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 166.

⁶¹ Statement of Mrs. Agnes Waters, Washington, D. C. , Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 80th congress, 1st session, March 24, 25, 27, 31, 1947, a bill to provide for assistance to Greece and Turkey ; Glen Jeansonne, *Women of the Far Right: The Mother’s Movement and World War II* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr, 1996) ; Leader of “Mothers of America” Attacks Jews at Hearing Before Senate Committee, JTA, September 8, 1944.

Americans... We must protect our own children... These children are seasoned veterans of a revolution of hate, are fertile for anarchy, and as such are potential leaders of a revolt against our American form of government. I object to this bill not only on the ground that it will add to the problem of unemployment of our own American people, but if we admit this large number of refugees from Europe, they may become a menace to our country and to our institutions.”⁶² Waters went on to declare that accepting “so-called innocent, helpless children” as Dorothy Thompson suggests would lead to revolt and deprive American children of “their right to worship God, of free speech, and of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... we will all become slaves.”⁶³ Revealing the troubling sentiment that Thompson and representatives like Wagner and Rogers were up against, Waters concluded her statement with an enduring rallying call, “I think we should consider Americans first. Let’s keep America for Americans.”⁶⁴ It was this sentiment that influenced Congress to keep thousands off American shores during the refugee crisis. A like-minded woman named Margaret Hopkins Worrell, leader of the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic, also spoke against Thompson at the Wagner-Rogers Bill committee hearing. She testified that allowing 20,000 children into the US would mean that they would also be pressured to “take their parents, siblings, cousins and aunts” as well.⁶⁵ Further, she questioned if “charitable persons” would actually take children in,⁶⁶ including whether Dorothy Thompson would take on such a role. While Worrell was fully intending for this to make

⁶² Statement of Miss Dorothy Thompson, 197-98.

⁶³ Ibid, 198.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 199.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 224.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 225.

Thompson appear hypocritical, she was mistaken. When it came to aiding refugees, Thompson was already privately practicing what she was publicly preaching in her campaigns.

Thompson's Personal Mission to Aid Refugees

In the latter half of the 1930s it is clear that Thompson's public life was in full swing, but her private life suffered. In a speech for the Women's City Club on May 12, 1937, Thompson stated,

I go to sleep and I awake thinking of the world in which I live. My whole personal life has become in a profound sense of secondary importance, and indeed, it, so immediate and so practical, is the part which is dream-like and unreal, and the other [Nazism and refugees], more remote, touching me personally so little, is the imminent, the overwhelming reality.⁶⁷

Initially, Sinclair Lewis understood Thompson's anguish and was an immense supporter of her career interests and personal mission to awaken the American conscience and help refugees. However, ever since Dorothy Thompson became a central figure in American public life, their relationship had begun to crumble. Lewis himself was rather unstable due to a near constant battle with alcoholism. In the years leading up to 1938, Lewis was increasingly annoyed with his wife's success. From watching the couple close friend Vincent Sheean observed, "It was much more than he had bargained for (the President on the telephone and the senators on the doorstep)."⁶⁸ Lewis despised being referred to as "Dorothy's husband," apparently a common occurrence. By the time Thompson's mission had evolved into organized initiatives that absorbed the majority of her time, their marriage

⁶⁷ Speech for the Women's City Club, 12 May 1937, Speeches: America folder, box 103, DT Papers.

⁶⁸ Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 225.

was all but officially dissolved. Lewis mostly presented himself as an occasional visitor to Twin Farms or their home in New York until they finally divorced in 1942.⁶⁹

Though Lewis was not consistently around, Thompson was never truly alone. Ever since she had returned to the United States permanently in 1934, she had the constant company of refugee friends. Throughout the duration of the 1930s, Thompson matched her public call for American action with her own individual mission to personally aid refugees. During her time in Europe Thompson had cultivated a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, many who now needed help to leave their homes.⁷⁰ Thompson was a sponsor for numerous Jews who fled Hitler's Europe and they became known as "Dorothy's Refugees."⁷¹ The fortunate 125,000 Jews who found refuge in America during the 1930s were saved, for the most part, thanks to personal contacts in the United States.⁷² Thompson tried to be this contact for every refugee she knew or whose name was suggested to her and Twin Farms in Vermont became a gathering spot for many of these immigrants – so much so that the region gained names such as "Mittel Vermont, Sudeten Vermont" and "Little Mittel Europa."⁷³ In many cases she provided a place to live, jobs, and great encouragement for those she brought over.

To aid just one person in coming to the US meant a "blizzard of letters and telegrams," the help of government officials, and guarantees from numerous sponsors.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ibid, 272.

⁷⁰ Statement of Miss Dorothy Thompson, 161.

⁷¹ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 280.

⁷² Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2004), 260.

⁷³ Karina Von Tippelskirch, "Central Europe in Vermont : German Exile Writers and the American Journalist Dorothy Thompson." In *Networks of Refugees from Nazi Germany : Continuities, Reorientations, and Collaborations in Exile* (Boston: Leiden, 2016), 149.

⁷⁴ Sarna, *American Judaism*, 260.

Much of Thompson's incoming and outgoing correspondence in the latter half of the 1930s and early 1940s reflects this.⁷⁵ Raymond Swing noted that during these years Thompson was known to have "bombarded Mrs. Roosevelt with requests for a visa."⁷⁶ She constantly corresponded with legal aids and the American Consulate, discussing visas, sponsorship, and other paperwork necessary to bring refugees into her care. She filled out sponsorship applications for visas, showing that she had the means to aid refugees that she was bringing over. The government, clearly already wary of taking in new immigrants, wanted proof that those who came over would be "useful" citizens, could attain a job, and did not have criminal backgrounds. Therefore, Thompson had to vouch for them by describing her own personal character and financial credibility, as well as the character and credibility of the refugee or refugees that she was taking on.

Thompson sponsored numerous friends and acquaintances who were persecuted for their Jewish identity, Jewish heritage, or their political beliefs. For example, when asked if she would be willing to take in a friend's child should he "land in a concentration camp" for being Jewish, Thompson "committed [herself] without hesitation" to the possibility of raising this child.⁷⁷ When she could acquire the proper paperwork, Thompson also sponsored entire families to emigrate to the US. One family to which she gave significant help was that of the playwright Carl Zuckmayer, who had Jewish heritage, his wife, and their daughter. After fleeing from Austria to Switzerland in 1938, Thompson helped secure

⁷⁵ Incoming and outgoing correspondence, DT Papers.

⁷⁶ Letter from Raymond Swing to Dorothy Thompson, 28 August 1947, Stu-Syr folder, incoming correspondence, box 26, DT Papers.

⁷⁷ Statement of Miss Dorothy Thompson, 161.

the necessary visas and finances for the family to make it to the US.⁷⁸ She provided an affidavit and obtained a letter of support from FDR which allowed the family entrance despite having invalid German passports. Upon their arrival Thompson put them in her apartment off Central Park and then moved them up to Twin Farms in Vermont. She provided for the family financially and also connected Zuckmayer with American writers and her wide circle of friends.⁷⁹ In addition to the Zuckmayer family, Thompson aided others who were Jews and anti-fascists. The list is long, but some of the more well-known emigrants were Jewish actress Elisabeth Bergner, playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht and his Jewish wife and actress Helene Weigel, Jewish poet and novelist Joachim Maass, and Jewish writer and historian Johannes Urzidil and his Jewish wife and poet, Gertrude Thieberger.⁸⁰

Many of the people Thompson sponsored needed extra paperwork and were delayed due to the long waiting list that the European situation had produced. The impossibility of obtaining certain papers on the European end, due to difficult Nazi regulations and the flood of Jews trying to escape, made it unlikely to get one's name on the waitlist in the first place.⁸¹ Thompson was someone who could aid those who had a difficult time with the complicated bureaucracy on the American end. She frequently wrote letters of support to help them become approved for US visas. One affidavit of support reveals Thompson's involvement with the immigration of Antonina Valentin Luchoire, a

⁷⁸ Tippelskirch, *Central Europe in Vermont*, 156.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 158.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*.

⁸¹ Letter from Leo Taub (Thompson's Attorney) to Fritz Kortner, 22 April 1938, Kortner, Fritz 30 Mar 1938- 04 Sep 1941 folder, incoming correspondence, box 16, DT Papers.

writer and biographer, who was applying for a visa for herself, her mother Evelene Selberstein, and her daughter Irene Valentin Luchaire and husband Julien Luchaire. Thompson wrote, “I am willing to take care of her and her family until the time when she will be self-supporting.”⁸² For those who were fortunate enough to secure a place within the quota system through family connections or appeal to friends and prominent figures such as Thompson, there was a better chance of attaining refuge.

After the emigrants' arrival in the US, Thompson made sure to connect them with her wide network of friends and help them adjust to American society. She was close with many and some of them even helped with her ongoing public missions against Nazism and for refugees. One refugee in particular who became involved in Thompson's greater public efforts was Fritz Kortner, a renowned Jewish actor in Berlin during the Weimar period. Thompson met Kortner while living in Germany in 1927 and because of their mutual interests in arts and theater, they became fast friends.⁸³ After the Nazis rose to power, Kortner was labeled as the Reich's most hated Jewish actor and knew he would need to leave his home.⁸⁴ He was helped to the US on a temporary tourist visa by Thompson in 1937. She then managed to acquire a permanent visa for Kortner in 1938 and also sponsored his wife Johann Hofer, children Peter and Marianne, and his elderly mother Helene Kohn to emigrate as well.⁸⁵ After arrival in the US, Kortner was taken under Thompson's wing and soon became part of her influential inner circle. He also became a

⁸² Letter from Dorothy Thompson, 7 April 1941, Jan-April 1941 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

⁸³ Richard Critchfield, *From Shakespeare to Frisch: The Provocative Fritz Kortner* (Heidelberg: Synchron, 2008), 74.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 76 and Karina Von Tippelskirch, “Weimar on Broadway: Fritz Kortner and Dorothy Thompson's Refugee Play ‘Another Sun’.” *Nexus*, no. 2 (2014): 84.

trusted political and artistic advisor for Thompson.⁸⁶ This relationship was so widely known that Bertolt Brecht, another “Dorothy refugee” and good friend of Kortner, noted in his diary entry of November 18, 1941 that *Der Stuermer* depicted Kortner as the devil dictating articles to Thompson.⁸⁷

It is not a surprise that Thompson and Kortner received attention such as this. They made a public name for themselves as an anti-Nazi and pro-refugee duo because throughout 1938 the pair had begun working on yet another public campaign. This time it was an artistic and cultural plea for Jewish refugees, an avenue quite different from the political State Department intervention or the journalistic and legal campaign for Grynspan which Thompson was simultaneously orchestrating. Somewhat similar to Thompson’s influence on *It Can’t Happen Here* in 1935, this time she co-wrote and co-produced a play about Jewish refugees called *Another Sun*. Although *It Can’t Happen Here* highlighted the plight of Jews, its main focus was on the dangers of Nazism and American silence, *Another Sun* put Hitler’s victims center stage while also imploring Americans to take action.

Another Sun premiered at the National Theater on Broadway on February 23, 1940 and it focused on a group of eight refugees and their journeys to the United States after the annexation of Austria. The play’s aim was to change the American public’s apathy toward the plight of Hitler’s victims – appealing to them emotionally to sway opinion toward action and aid. The play’s main character was modeled after Kortner himself. The audience follows the refugee actor’s struggles trying to make a new life for himself in the US and

⁸⁶ Fritz Kortner, *Aller Tage Abend* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1969), 289.

⁸⁷ Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal: 1938 bis 1942* (Suhrkamp, 1973), 183 and Berthold Viertel et al., *Kindheit Eines Cherub: Autobiographische Fragmente, Antifaschistische Literatur Und Exilliteratur 4* (Wien: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1991), 232.

the help he and others received from Susan Van Ryn, an American news photographer, and Clifford Jackson, an American newspaper correspondent – characters loosely based on Thompson.⁸⁸ Throughout the play the characters’ struggles in the US are highlighted as well as the difficulty involved with trying to get friends and relatives out of Europe. The characters frequently fail to get others to the US because of the strict immigration process. However, the correspondent Clifford Jackson works to rescue refugees by lying and telling immigration officials that they are relatives and then providing affidavits. While illegal in the play, this mimics Thompson’s own legal real-life actions and is a plea for the audience to follow in these footsteps.⁸⁹ This hits home when at the play’s end, one of the Jews they were trying to get out of Europe is murdered by the Nazis. Ultimately, the main message of the play was that Americans could, and should be, great supporters of refugees – and that the situation was dangerous enough that using illegal or unorthodox ways was necessary and acceptable. Interestingly, once the war started in Europe, Thompson would soon be affiliated with these more drastic rescue attempts in real life. While *Another Sun* reveals another avenue of Thompson’s personal mission to aid Jewish refugees, unfortunately it proved to be a public failure on Broadway.⁹⁰ Reviewers acknowledged that the play was an artistic attempt at expressing the “alarms [Thompson] sends out three times a week in her syndicated column,” but that the play was a “static and prolix drama.”⁹¹ The themes did not connect with the audience as intended and playgoers were not accustomed

⁸⁸ Tippelskirch, “Another Sun,” 85.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 86.

⁹⁰ “THE PLAY: Dorothy Thompson and Fritz Kortner Examine the Refugee Problem in ‘Another Sun’ By BROOKS ATKINSON,” *New York Times*, February 24, 1940, sec. Society.

⁹¹ Ibid.

to the Weimar stage's artistic style. While a creative avenue, *Another Sun* can be seen as another failed attempt to inspire action from the United States and it highlights the harsh reality that Americans, on both a political and humanitarian level, mostly wanted to remain quite distant from the situation in Europe.

During her personal quest to aid refugees, Thompson also experienced some roadblocks. Like characters in her play, she was familiar with failed attempts at trying to bring over refugees who could not get through the emigration process. However, wanting to do as much as she could, Thompson helped these unlucky people financially from afar. There are numerous examples of Thompson pouring her efforts into an individual or a family's immigration, but the plan falling through. In the case of her dear friend and mentor Eugenie Schwarzwald, the Austrian pedagogue, Thompson helped with "the Schwarzwald Fund." Thompson worked to organize this fund after the *Anschluss* with the aim of bringing Dr. Schwarzwald and her family to the United States. Thompson gave \$1,000 to this effort and personally secured visas for "Genia, Maridl, and Hemme."⁹² On May 15, Thompson wrote to Alvin Johnson, President of the New School for Social Research and major figure in bringing German-Jewish scholars to the US, "If you will give her [Eugenie Schwarzwald] a lectureship at the New School, I myself will underwrite it all."⁹³ Thompson was prepared to provide a salary of \$4,000 for her friend. Unfortunately, this plan was not realized. Mrs. Schwarzwald had undergone two cancer surgeries and her husband was very ill, leading them to the decision to remain in Europe. After Thompson heard their decision,

⁹² Letter from Edward Cushing to Dorothy Thompson, 1 May 1939, Schwarzwald, Eugenie folder, box 27, DT Papers.

⁹³ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Alvin Johnson, 15 May 1939, 1939 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 27, DT Papers.

she arranged to have \$100 sent to the Schwarzwald's every month.⁹⁴ In August 1939, Hermann passed away. In August 1940, Thompson received the sad news that Eugenie Schwarzwald, her long-time friend, had also passed. Thompson was slightly comforted with the statement, "only through you was it possible that she survived."⁹⁵

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, Thompson's income was roughly \$100,000 a year, an enormous sum of \$1,831,350 in the present day.⁹⁶ Of this robust income, Thompson gave half of that away to refugee organizations and to those that she personally sponsored.⁹⁷ Notably, her agent's wife wrote, "In those years, whenever I saw Dorothy she had an envelope full of immigration papers in her handbag. She was always collecting affidavits of support for someone."⁹⁸ According to the affidavits that were copied or made it back to her papers, Thompson personally sponsored and brought at least twenty Jewish refugees. This does not count those she helped financially from afar, those who are alluded to in countless letters of correspondence, those who she aided after they made it to the U.S. on their own, and those, who for one reason or another, could not make it through the immigration process. This also does not consider the personal aid she poured into refugee organizations. From just this collection of papers it is difficult to discern an accurate number for "Dorothy's refugees," as many of the affidavits, outgoing letters, and other proof of immigration did not end up returning to her for the collection at Syracuse. Therefore, it is probable that a significant number of these records are scattered among

⁹⁴ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Eugenie Schwarzwald, 6 June 1939, Schwarzwald, Eugenie folder, box 27, DT Papers.

⁹⁵ Letter from Maridl Stiasny to Dorothy Thompson, 8 August 1940, Schwarzwald, Eugenie folder, box 27, DT Papers.

⁹⁶ "CPI Inflation Calculator," accessed June 2, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

⁹⁷ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 238.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 275.

relatives, various archives, or lost altogether. Nevertheless, it is clear that Thompson's private and public life seemed to blur together in the latter 1930s, personally sponsoring as many refugees as she could, operating the logistics of rescue causes, intervening with the State Department and FDR, and publicly calling for other Americans to take part in a variety of humanitarian initiatives consumed almost all of her time.

CHAPTER 6: FIGHTING THE “GERMAN INFERNO” ABROAD AND AT HOME, 1939-1941

During the summer of 1938, as the refugee crisis was in full swing, Hitler also began making military threats to gain more territory on the European map. Specifically, he desired the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, claiming that due to its ethnic German population, it should be part of the Reich. In July 1938, Dorothy Thompson wrote a piece she called “Czechoslovakia on the Record” in which she outlined her emerging belief system; not only did the democracies need to aid refugees, they also needed to end their policy of appeasement and seriously consider waging war against Hitler and fascism. Thompson warned that the continued “failure to comprehend the dictatorial mind [was] the great weakness of democracy.”¹ Like Winston Churchill, she recognized the failure of Britain’s appeasement policy and the fact that while democracies were “weakening themselves for the sake of maintaining peace,” the dictatorships were “strengthening themselves at the risk of war” without any limit on the possibility of expansion.² Thompson criticized the lack of action by the democracies when Hitler took Austria and now with his intentions for Czechoslovakia. She cautioned that this inaction was filling Hitler with arrogance, proving his belief that he could get away with whatever he wanted. Likewise, she worried that this apathy also filled the democracies with a sense of “defeatism” and an underestimation of their own power to stop Hitler, enabling his threatening actions.³ From

¹ Dorothy Thompson, *Czechoslovakia on the Record*, New York Listy Publishing Co. (July 1938), 18. (This column appeared in NYHT in late May 1938).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

this article it is clear that Thompson was growing tired with the repeated leniency of the democracies and her fears proved correct as Hitler swept across the European map, starting with the invasion of Poland and the official beginning to World War II in September 1939. This chapter will focus on Thompson's increased attention to stopping Hitler through military intervention, including her vocal participation in the American anti-isolation movement, her formation of new pro-democracy initiatives to contrast with the fascist agenda and to persuade Americans of the urgency and necessity of actively fighting Nazi Germany, and her continued relationship with the PACOPR and its new role in a rescue mission to save refugees who fell under Hitler's grasp after the Fall of France.

In 1939, Thompson published a book with selected column articles on the European crisis called *Let the Record Speak*.⁴ The book showed her growing frustration with the masses and their complacency on the refugee issue, as well as their continued desire to stay neutral in the war. Thompson still insisted on the Nazi problem being a world problem, a problem that now included entering the war in order to preserve democracy and the freedoms that come with it. Charles Poore of the *New York Times* said that *Let the Record Speak* should be called "Let the Record Shout," due to Thompson's strong insistence on American action in the face of this threat.⁵ In April 1939, Thompson followed her established pattern of publicly calling for something as a journalist and then working as a political or private advocate for the same cause. The same week that Thompson advocated for the Wagner-Rogers bill in Congress, she also spoke in front of the Foreign Affairs Committee. She pleaded for a repeal of the American Neutrality Act, arguing that the

⁴ Dorothy Thompson, *Let the Record Speak* (Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1939).

⁵ Thompson, *Let the Record Speak*, 234.

neutrality laws prevented the FDR administration from freely forming policies in foreign affairs, especially as the European situation continued to worsen.⁶ Despite these efforts, the final Neutrality Act was passed in November 1939. Though, this final act did lift the arms embargo and made trade with belligerent nations a possibility, inching the nation closer to intervention.

Evident from her “On the Record” column and her political advocacy, Thompson was growing tired of those who were “anti-Nazi, but pro nothing else,” and like many in her circle of friends, she believed the United States was “drunk with pacifism” when it should be preparing for war.⁷ At the time, American public opinion overwhelmingly opposed involvement in European affairs, and only 3 percent favored military involvement in the new war.⁸ Thompson adamantly spoke out against such neutrality sentiment and denounced the American antisemitism that informed segments of the supporters. The neutrality movement was bolstered by “rapidly growing anti-Semitic organizations that were accusing Jews of trying to drag America into the war.”⁹ In 1940, American isolationists founded the America First Committee to protest US involvement in the war and the organization was a breeding ground for antisemitism.¹⁰ American antisemitism had been on the rise since Henry Ford’s insistence throughout the 1920s and 30s that “international financiers [were] behind all war... they are what is called the international

⁶ Harris & Ewing, “Woman Columnist Advocates Repeal of Neutrality Act to Allow U.S. Freedom of Policy. Washington, D.C., April 26. photo, print, drawing, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, April 26, 1939, <https://www.loc.gov/item/hec2009013259/>.

⁷ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 311.

⁸ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 234.

⁹ *Ibid*, 235.

¹⁰ Mordden, *The Guest List*, 161 and Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 235.

Jew: German Jews, French Jews, English Jews, American Jews.... The Jew is a threat.”¹¹ During the height of American isolation, this type of antisemitic thinking seeped into the America First Committee movement. Unsurprisingly the organization easily attracted Americans who sympathized with Hitler’s thoughts about the Jewish problem; many joined who believed that Jews were dominating the financial world, dragged the US into WWI for profit, and now wanted to do it again.¹² The America First Committee gained a national following, holding rallies across the country and through a national radio hookup, they were regularly featured on the airwaves.

Thompson vocally opposed the actions of the America First Committee, calling them out for sympathizing with Nazism. She characterized members of the Committee in the following manner: “Your attorney, your old college buddy... your banker friends, no less! God damn it.... They’re discovered that Hitler is a good Republican!”¹³ Thompson was well aware that average Americans often fell into the isolationist category and unfortunately, swayed by organizations like this, believed that Nazism was not a pertinent concern for the United States. To combat this phenomenon, Thompson went on her own anti-isolation campaign and boosted popular support for intervention. During this campaign America First type groups were an obvious target. In particular, the avid spokesperson for American First with popularity that rivaled her own, Charles Lindbergh, became her public enemy for having Nazi “affinities and isolationist sentiment.” She engaged in cultural combat with him, calling him “America’s number one problem child,”

¹¹ Max Wallace, *The American Axis: Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and the Rise of the Third Reich* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 7.

¹² Mordden, *The Guest List*, 161.

¹³ *Ibid*, 162.

a term she used to call Hitler, while also saying that Lindbergh had the notion to “be the American fuehrer.”¹⁴ Lindbergh took to the airwaves giving speeches such as “Neutrality and War” in which he urged Americans to stay out of European issues and insisted that “Our bond with Europe is a bond of race and not of political ideology.”¹⁵ After this speech in October 1940, Thompson was one of his earliest critics, calling him a man “without human feeling.”¹⁶ In Eleanor Roosevelt’s famed column, she confirmed Thompson’s quick and accurate analysis, praising her opinion of Lindbergh and America First, writing that “[Thompson] sensed in Colonel Lindbergh’s speech a sympathy with Nazi ideals which I thought existed but could not bring myself to believe was really there.”¹⁷ Lindbergh and America First only further demonstrated their approval of certain Nazi ideas. During a speech in Iowa, Lindbergh began to name the “invisible forces” he thought were pushing the US toward war: “The three most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war are the British, the Jewish and the Roosevelt administration... Leaders of the Jewish [race], for reasons that are understandable from their viewpoint as they are inadvisable from ours, for reasons which are not American, wish to involve us in the war.”¹⁸

Beyond Lindbergh and America First, there were even more adamant Nazi groups within the United States. While on the fringe, these groups came to be after some fanatical Nazis fled to the US after their failed coup in 1923. They formed two groups, the Landesgruppe USA of the National Socialist German Labor Party and the Friends of the

¹⁴ Ibid, 133.

¹⁵ Wallace, *American Axis*, 209.

¹⁶ Ibid, 210.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 289.

Hitler Movement. After 1933 these groups merged into the Friends of New Germany and flourished throughout the 30s with the help of the German-American Bund, a home-grown pro-Nazi organization. By 1939, the Bund had more than 2,500 regular members and ten times the sympathizers.¹⁹ The growing support for these types of organizations was boosted by German propaganda efforts that were aimed toward fascist undercurrents in the United States.²⁰ For example, the Nazi government issued open testimonies and decrees stating that the German American Bund had agents working for it from the Third Reich and that they intended to spread Nazi ideology.²¹ Thompson frequently went on the radio decrying the spread of Nazi propaganda throughout the United States. For example, on October 20, she went on the airwaves to discuss the confession of Dr. Friedrich Ernst Auhagen of the American Fellowship Forum (a pro-isolation pro-German group) that he and others were Nazi agents involved with “sweeping Nazi propaganda being fed to groups in the US.”²² In light of this, Thompson told her listeners that “Americans ought to know that the Nazis here, as in all countries, neglect no section of the population. The Bund and the anti-Semitic organizations are their means of reaching what they call the American rabble... They go after them through organizations and publications that claim to be wholly American.”²³ Thompson was correct in her observation since various pseudo-Nazi groups shared much

¹⁹ Egbert Krispyn. *Anti-Nazi Writers in Exile* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 109.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Speech delivered on March 17, 1939 in Detroit, folder speeches: America 1, box 103, DT Papers.

²² Dorothy Thompson broadcast “Pilot,” Sunday, October 20, 1940 at 8:45pm, Fight for Freedom Inc. Records 1922-1942, 1983-1973, Box 18, Folder Dorothy Thompson, Manuscripts Division, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University Library [Hereafter FFFIR].

²³ Ibid.

of the same platform as the America First Committee – namely that involvement with the European war was unnecessary, un-American, and unpatriotic.²⁴

Thompson's most famed instance of combating these prevalent "America First" mentalities was on February 20, 1939, when more than 20,000 gathered to listen to the German-American Bund at Madison Square Garden in New York City. The gathering was a "Pro-America Rally" where presenters spoke out against the "war-mongering, Jew-loving Franklin Roosevelt."²⁵ They picked the date to honor George Washington's birthday and had an enormous portrait of the president with American flags on one side, and Nazi flags with swastikas on the other. Enthusiastic attendees were decked out in Nazi symbols such as armbands, waved small American and Nazi flags, made the Nazi salute, and held posters with slogans like "Stop Jewish Domination of Christian America." Speeches were dripping with antisemitism, with complaints of job stealing Jewish refugees and demands for a white gentile-ruled America.²⁶ Further, the speeches lamented that Jews would turn the United States into a "Bolshevik paradise," speaking to fears of a "Fifth Column" and unreliable refugees.²⁷ The massive meeting was rowdy, with fist fights breaking out between sympathizers and left wing protestors who gathered in the street.²⁸

Showing her unwavering courage, Thompson, whom the stormtrooper-like guards tried to stop from attending the meeting, cut her way through the packed crowd to the front

²⁴ "BUND HOLDS MEETING AS 'PATRIOTIC CLUB': ROOSEVELT IS DENOUNCED AS PROBRITISH AND UN-AMERICAN." *New York Times*, September 26, 1939.

²⁵ *New York Post* Article, Thursday 25 September 1941, Page 8, folder Ring of Freedom, box 24, DT Papers.

²⁶ Field of Vision, *Field of Vision - A Night at the Garden*, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/237489146>.

²⁷ "22,000 NAZIS HOLD RALLY IN GARDEN; POLICE CHECK FOES: SCENES AS GERMAN-AMERICAN BUND HELD ITS 'WASHINGTON BIRTHDAY' RALLY LAST NIGHT." *New York Times*, February 21, 1939.

²⁸ Krispyn, *Anti-Nazi Writers*, 109.

of the reporter section and hysterically laughed aloud during an introduction speech that heavily featured antisemitic rhetoric. During her hysterical fit of laughter, Thompson had to be escorted out by the New York Police Department for her own safety. As she hoped, the dramatic situation made headline news, championing Thompson and her cause for action against such forces. Following the rally Thompson used her column to write about what had happened, exposing the alliance between “Father Coughlin and the followers of Fritz Kuhn (Leader of the German-American Bund) to abolish the American democracy as we have known it since the days of Lincoln.” She reported that there were many references to Father Coughlin’s leadership and, “as it was predicted in *It Can’t Happen Here*, with the instruments of democracy they intend to set up this country as a fascist regime.”²⁹ Thompson told her readers that at Madison Square Garden she again learned what she already had heard in Berlin years before, “that all of our press, our finance, our government and our cultural life are in the hands of Jews and that the Jews are Communists.” She called the meeting an organized boycott orchestrated by “aryan” citizens who believed themselves to be superior to other “non-aryan” American citizens.³⁰ The meeting caused thousands of counter-protesters who felt similarly to Thompson to flood New York City streets, exposing a deep divide between interventionists and extreme isolationists within the United States.

²⁹ Dorothy Thompson, On the Record “To the Intolerant,” February 22, 1939, From the Library of Congress, *Reid Family Papers*, box D254, folder Dorothy Thompson.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

An Organized Campaign for Intervention

While Dorothy Thompson viewed the America First Committee and its followers as her mortal enemy, they also saw her as their primary pro-intervention target. The documents of the America First Committee are filled with references to Thompson's troublesome and persistent campaign against their mission.³¹ For example, in a memo about radio network commentators, Samuel R. Romer of the Writers Anti-War Bureau wrote to fellow America First member, Sidney Hertzberg, stated that Thompson is "the most obvious interventionist of the lot...who attracts not only her own following but the audience of the 'American Forum of the Air' which precedes hers on the network."³² The memo has four pages of dangerous interventionists with Thompson topping the list, insisting that she "should be watched carefully" for her pro-interventionist commentary.³³

However, because of her public persona as an interventionist and a defender of the Jewish community, Thompson was also personally targeted by more extreme isolationists who were also unapologetic antisemites. For example, anti-Jewish pamphleteer Robert Edward Edmonson believed that the "Jewish system" aimed to "enslave the United States as it did in Russia and France"³⁴ and stated things like the following: "If enough real Americans learn, by becoming 'Jew-conscious,' that the Roosevelt New Deal is a Jew Deal to wreck the Republic, it will be promptly disposed of, peacefully if possible, forcefully is

³¹ Justus D. Doenecke and America First Committee, eds. *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee* (Stanford, Calif: Hoover Institution Press, 1990).

³² *Ibid*, 385.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ News report from Edmondson, May 28 1936, From the Library of Congress, *Reid Family Papers*, box D255, folder Correspondence Concerning Dorothy Thompson.

necessary.”³⁵ Edmondson frequently lashed out at Thompson, asserting that all her actions were because she was controlled by Jews. Others like Edmondson also attempted to hurt Thompson’s image by aggressively trying to prove that she secretly had Jewish roots. For example, Thompson frequently wrote to her editor at the *Herald Tribune*, Helen Reid, that she received malicious accusations that she was certainly a Jew merely masking as a Christian. These accusations about Thompson were also being spread throughout America First and pseudo-Nazi groups’ propaganda campaigns. Thompson wrote to Reid expressing the antisemitic nature of such statements, saying “I would not consider it an insult to be called Jewish but most of the people who are saying I am intend it to be an insult...I consider this whole business supremely irrelevant and it is only in order to settle malicious gossip rising from pro-fascists who want to destroy everything this country stands for, that I thus expose my own ancestry. I consider the raising of the question unamerican.”³⁶ Publicly Thompson confirmed what was happening to her, saying to her readers that the “black magic” of antisemitism can easily “spread to those Gentiles who are not anti-Semites... it becomes as bad to be the Friend of the Jews as to be a Jew.”³⁷ Besides these attacks, which reveal the virulent form of American antisemitism, the analysis that Thompson was the poster-child for intervention – and a dangerously good one at that – was quite sound. Between 1939 and 1941 she energetically threw herself into various interventionist committees, was recruited by British agents looking to share pro-war propaganda in the

³⁵ Robert Edward Edmondson, “‘Miss’ Dorothy Thompson Exposes Her Jew – Control,” May 28, 1936, From the Library of Congress, *Reid Family Papers*, box D255, folder Correspondence Concerning Dorothy Thompson.

³⁶ Undated letter from Dorothy Thompson to Helen Reid, From the Library of Congress, *Reid Family Papers*, box D255, folder Correspondence Concerning Dorothy Thompson.

³⁷ “The Jews Need Normality,” *The Sentinel*, Thursday, November 27, 1941, Page: 7.

US, became a vocal advisor to President Roosevelt, and started her own democratic pro-war organization – the Ring of Freedom.

Various interventionist organizations popped up to urge the US government to enter the war to aid Britain and France, and they acted as the counterpoint to the fervent isolationist groups. Thompson was a public supporter and member of many of these organizations, such as the Committee to Defend the Allies and the Fight for Freedom Committee to Defend America.³⁸ These groups aimed to mobilize American public opinion to support the war with the goal of influencing the government to join the Allies.³⁹ They also sought to give Americans a new internationalist vision of what the world could be – promoting democracy globally to defeat fascism (and communism) overseas. Therefore, the vision that these organizations presented was increasingly a global conflict that had two distinct worldviews. This vision was aided by British propaganda support for some of these organizations and their spokespeople. To transform American public opinion to obtain sorely needed aid in the war effort, Britain supplied a steady flow of information from Europe to influential American minds. The people which were targeted were not politicians or government officials, but journalists and celebrities who molded public opinion and therefore helped to restructure policy.⁴⁰ Given her personal commitment to fight Nazism, Dorothy Thompson was one of the key players in Britain’s strategy.

³⁸ Andrew Johnstone, *Against Immediate Evil: American Internationalists and the Four Freedoms on the Eve of World War II* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 175.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁰ Nicholas John Cull, *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign against American “Neutrality” in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

Since 1934, President Roosevelt and Britain had maintained a regular exchange of radio news commentaries over the Columbia Broadcasting System and the BBC. This allowed journalists and spokespeople to transmit messages between both nations. While the average American was expressly apathetic to the situation, many kept a close ear on European news and wanted this radio connection. This also strengthened the American press in Europe, especially emboldening the radio correspondent.⁴¹ By the time intervention became a major influence in American life, journalists such as Thompson had been convinced that Hitler needed to be stopped for years, and many of them were well disposed toward Britain.⁴² Further, Thompson and other American journalists who had a positive relationship with Britain fell clearly into the anti-Chamberlain camp.⁴³ This combination of factors made it quite easy for Britain to influence American news outlets and aid interventionist groups after the start of the war.

By 1940, Great Britain, anticipating that its survival would hinge on American involvement, set up a secret operation to help the US move closer to aiding the war effort and enter the war. The British Security Coordination (BSC), an effective propaganda machine, set up shop in the US to rally the American public opinion behind England.⁴⁴ Winston Churchill, with the quiet permission of Roosevelt, instructed the BSC to do everything possible “to drag” their reluctant ally into the war against Germany.⁴⁵ The BSC planted its propaganda in newspapers, radio stations, wire services, and used connections

⁴¹ Ibid, 14.

⁴² Ibid, 15.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Jennet Conant, *The Irregulars: Roald Dahl and the British Spy Ring in Wartime Washington* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010), XIV and Thomas Mahl, *Desperate Deception: British Covert Operations in the United States, 1939-44* (Ashland, Or.: Blackstone Audiobooks, 1999), 47.

⁴⁵ Conant, *The Irregulars*, XVI.

with sympathetic journalists to help spread their messages. Dorothy Thompson, Walter Winchell, and Walter Lippmann were among the top journalists involved.⁴⁶

One key secret operative to orchestrate this was Roald Dahl, who later became the noted children's book author. He and more than one thousand other spies were placed in the US to gather intelligence and influence these leading journalists. Dahl charmed Mrs. Ogden Reid, Thompson's *Herald Tribune* publisher, into running articles that favored the war effort and he also became close with Thompson's other *Foreign Affairs* editor and member of the PACOPR, Hamilton Fish Armstrong.⁴⁷ With these connections, it is unsurprising that Thompson has been accused of being one of the journalists who functioned as a secret British intelligence agent.⁴⁸ Thompson's reporting and radio commentary during this period was closely aligned with the British propaganda line of the day and in a file that the FBI has on her there are many pages detailing this, some of which are withheld for national security purposes. In addition, in a diary that she briefly kept in 1942, her close connections with the British and American intelligence community are revealed – she notes a dozen meetings with people like Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Emmy Rado, English historian of German history and agent of the British Information Service in NYC, J. Wheeler-Bennett, and founder of the OSS (precursor to the CIA) who worked closely with British Intelligence, William Donovan.⁴⁹

By 1941, the BSC also reached interventionist organizations supplying significant funds to groups such as the Council for Democracy, Friends of Democracy, Fight for

⁴⁶ Ibid, XV.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 52.

⁴⁸ Mahl, *Desperate Deception*, 47.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 54.

Freedom Committee, and Thompson's own Ring of Freedom.⁵⁰ The BSC hoped to help these interventionist organizations and their trusted leaders with their counter-propaganda campaigns against isolation groups like the America First Committee. For example, the Council for Democracy, for which Thompson was a board member, put out frequent pamphlets that urged Americans to see the threat fascism wielded at home. In a short booklet titled "Nazi Poison: How We Can Destroy Hitler's Propaganda Against the Jews" the Council for Democracy presented a response to a prevalent sentiment within the US. A narrator tells the following story: "An hour before my Czech-American friend had almost wept over Hitler's seizure of Czechoslovakia. But now, paying no attention to what I had said, he suggested a plan for what "we," the non-Jews, ought to do with the Jews; round them all up and exile them to the Dakotas! "Let them do what they like there, but nowhere else in this country....'You mean a kind of concentration camp,' I said. 'Call it what you like,' he said. 'They get the best of you.' 'That's exactly what Hitler is doing in Europe...And what he hopes will happen here. You're helping him.'⁵¹ By calling out American antisemitism as thinly veiled Nazism, the Council for Democracy and these other interventionist groups put out counter-propaganda to advocate that "the place to begin fighting [Nazis] is in our homes, at our clubs, in our local schools, our shops or offices. The war is on in our own backyard. This is the heart of the insidious propaganda – the Nazi poison."⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid, 24.

⁵¹ Council For Democracy, *Nazi Poison: How We Can Destroy Hitler's Propaganda Against the Jews*, Democracy in Action 8 (New York: Council for Democracy, 1941), 2.

⁵² Ibid, 3.

Thompson took this concept of Nazi poison to new heights with her own advocacy. She used her radio platform to influence mass audiences toward intervention and personally became a close advisor to President Roosevelt. Throughout 1940 Thompson's voice was regularly heard during national broadcasts. She was a frequent speaker for the "Town Hall Meeting of the Air" on the NBC Blue Network. This program was a modern, democratic, and educational nation-wide forum to discuss domestic politics and foreign affairs. On January 12, 1940, Thompson delivered an address titled "Christian Ethics and Western Civilization" in which she encouraged Americans to resist the authoritarian impulses of Germany and Russia and to believe fully in democracy's power.⁵³ She closed out the speech by hearkening back to President Roosevelt's second inaugural address in which he said, "This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny." Envisioning a great battle between fascism and democracy, Thompson told her audience that she would enlarge that phrase: "This generation of Western men has a rendezvous with destiny. But I would like to think that that destiny is something which can be determined by our own wills and is not a blind date."⁵⁴ With this Thompson was urging intervention to help Britain and the other democracies conquer the Axis, using the United States' "extraordinary powerful political and moral position" which she insisted would prevail "provided we are willing to accept responsibility."⁵⁵

Over the next two years, Thompson pleaded for Americans to accept the democratic responsibility and vision for the world. In addition to her radio work, Thompson spent

⁵³ Dorothy Thompson, *Christian Ethics and Western Civilization: An Address Delivered at Town Hall*, vol. 4, Town Hall Pamphlets, II (Town Hall Meeting Inc., 1940), 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 20.

much of her time traveling the country to speak on behalf of interventionist organizations like the Fight for Freedom Committee. Most of these speeches and lectures specifically attacked America First while also spreading pro-war sentiment. Thompson's relentless schedule for early 1941 looked like this:⁵⁶

Feb 12th - Speaking in Hartford
Feb 13th - Speaking at Town Hall
Feb 14th - Broadcast from WMCA for Council for Democracy
February 15 and 16 in NYC
Feb 17 - leaving for Birmingham, Ala.
Feb 18 - Speaking at Birmingham
Feb 19 - Speaking in Spartanburg, SC
Feb 20 - Speaking in Washington , DC
Feb 23 in NYC
Feb 26th - Broadcast from Columbia for B. B. C. from New York, then St.,
Louis. Mo. for League of Women Voters and Committee to Defend
America by Aiding the Allies
Feb. 27 - Kansas City. Mo. - United Americans
March 3 to 8th (tentative) Dartmouth and New England Town Meetings
March 4 - Smith College, etc.
March 11 / 12th (tentative) Kent, Indiana -- meeting Auspices of Kentucky
League for British Victory

While she frantically made these mass appeals for intervention through radio or in person, Thompson also personally grew closer to the White House, specifically cultivating an advisory relationship with President Roosevelt, whom she had not previously publicly supported. Thompson's obsessive work for the cause of intervention and humanitarian activism was valued by Eleanor Roosevelt and members of the administration, so much so that the President invited her to "see [him] at any time about foreign affairs."⁵⁷ At the end

⁵⁶ "Dorothy Thompson Speaking Schedule, February 13, 1941," Box 18, Folder Dorothy Thompson, FFFIR.

⁵⁷ Telegram from Dorothy Thompson to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 21 September 1939; Folder: Thompson, Dorothy 1936-45; President's Official File 4818; Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt; FDR Library.

of 1940, due to her heightened activism for intervention and public endorsement of FDR's third term, the *New York Herald Tribune*, a more conservative outlet, refused to renew Thompson's column.⁵⁸ Ever since Thompson had become a vocal interventionist and supporter of FDR, both she and Helen Reid at the *Herald Tribune* had been receiving countless complaint letters from people who opposed Thompson's "liberal" viewpoints. In November, Reid even warned Thompson to start avoiding the topic of politics in her column – a foolish suggestion considering that Thompson was a political and foreign affairs commentator.⁵⁹

The complaint letters they were receiving were frequently sexist, speaking to Thompson's unique struggles as a female journalist in this period. They also depicted Thompson as too close to FDR and the White House. For example, L. A. Corya wrote the following: "My observation is that... a highly emotional screaming female [is mating] herself with a diabolical male (FDR)" to promote unnecessary war.⁶⁰ Another person, George V. Hook, wrote an equally sexist letter about Thompson's support for FDR: "Either Miss Thompson has not considered the issue honestly or has allowed herself to be carried away by Mr. Roosevelt's charm and personality. After all, she is a woman."⁶¹ Hundreds of complaints echo similar sentiments and also lash out at her for being a Jew-lover and pro-war fanatic. Because of this backlash, she was dropped from the *Herald Tribune* and she

⁵⁸ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Helen Reid, January 23, 1941, From the Library of Congress, *Reid Family Papers*, box D255, folder Dorothy Thompson.

⁵⁹ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Helen Reid, November 10, 1940, From the Library of Congress, *Reid Family Papers*, box D255, folder Dorothy Thompson.

⁶⁰ Letter to Helen Reid from L. A. Corya, October 22, 1940, From the Library of Congress, *Reid Family Papers*, box D255, folder Correspondence Concerning Dorothy Thompson.

⁶¹ Letter to Helen Reid George V. Hook, October 22, 1940, From the Library of Congress, *Reid Family Papers*, box D255, folder Correspondence Concerning Dorothy Thompson.

switched to the *New York Post*, which was run by Dorothy Schiff and had a more liberal audience. With this new platform Thompson continued her public mission against isolation and became closer to FDR behind the scenes.

FDR is well-known for highly valuing public opinion and gathering as much information about American sentiment as possible.⁶² The President always paid attention to opinion makers, especially media figures such as journalists, editors, and commentators.⁶³ In 1940 and 1941, through the BSC, Roosevelt eagerly gathered information from lavish parties where British intelligence people and American interventionist personalities were in attendance. For example, parties frequently included Arthur Hays Sulzberger, Henry Luce, Dorothy Thompson, Raymond Gram Swing, and William L. Shirer.⁶⁴ The opinions they gave about American aid to the British war effort and their hope for actual American involvement were relayed to FDR.

Beyond this indirect advisory role, Thompson also became a direct contact for Roosevelt after she shifted her weight to support him in his unprecedented third term election. After publicly pushing for his victory, she became a close confidant. Thompson's refugee friend Fritz Kortner recalled that on the evening of the election she called the White House and said, "This is Miss Thompson speaking, I want to talk to the President." She congratulated him on his victory and he thanked her for the great efforts she made on his behalf saying, "You lost your job, I kept mine. You lost your post, I kept mine."⁶⁵ Knowing how decisive her support had been, FDR kept her on as a regular advisor and she frequently

⁶² Casey, *Cautious Crusade*.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 16.

⁶⁴ Mahl, *Desperate Deception*, 73.

⁶⁵ Kortner, *Aller Tage, Abend*, 318.

contacted him with her opinions on foreign affairs. For example, on June 26, 1940 President Roosevelt acknowledged a handwritten note from Thompson about neutrality which said:

Dear Mr. President,

May I beg you from a deeply troubled heart to go much further than you have gone thus far, and to risk your whole political life on it?

We must before congress adjourns repeal the neutrality act in order to have our hands free. We must be prepared to send our ships into the war zone with food... You, personally, have nothing whatever to lose, nor has the wing of opinion that you represent. If Hitler wins outright a Republican will be elected and we shall have to deal with a form of coup d'état- or attempt at it in this country - a Nazi coup d'état... the pro-Hitler people are an organized minority and the rest of us are an unorganized majority... they will have success on their side. Their cry will be reconciliation and death to the warmongers, etc. (you know it) ... You ought to go on the air, attack nobody, but tell the country the truth that we are in the most serious situation of our history... Ask them to give the government the power to act ... Mr. president, I have seen the revolutions of this epoch firsthand, and I know how they are... Unless you do something radical... we are going to be in a bad way... If there is going to be a revolution in this country it's going to be an American revolution representing the fulfillment of the American dream or freedom and cooperation and not an imported one --- provided we act. I write you this, not in hysteria, but calmly... I ask no forgiveness for this long note written from my heart and my head.

Sincerely yours,
Dorothy Thompson

P.S. I write this to you rather than writing it myself -- you alone have the power to speak.⁶⁶

On July 8, Roosevelt wrote back to Thompson saying her ideas interested him but he made no promise to act. Yet, Thompson refused to stop giving her input. On July 12, 1940 she wrote to FDR again:

I doubt whether you, Mr. President, have even an inkling of the spiritual power you

⁶⁶ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Franklin D. Roosevelt, undated but acknowledged on June 26, 1940; Folder: Thompson, Dorothy; President's Personal File 6650; Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt; FDR Library.

possess in Europe... You are a legend... somehow, some way, the people believe you will bring liberation and peace to Europe ...I believe you should start making fireside talks to the people of the world... You must be a prophet and a father, with the voice of God, constantly appealing to all the things that Hitler does not know how to appeal to: Reason, affection, understanding, love and above all, the personal conscience... I think you are acting in a great way, and I only beg you to follow your instincts ... You must establish a polarity to Hitler ... I write you humbly, but nonetheless energetically, since to be energetic is still my nature.⁶⁷

Clearly Thompson was not shy about demanding a more aggressive American approach, even from the highest officials.

Though publicly he was cautious, Roosevelt did appreciate Thompson's advice and frequently used her as a resource behind the scenes. Thompson even maintained that some of Roosevelt's fireside chats were penned by her.⁶⁸ Though it is difficult to discern the significance of Thompson's advisory role in the White House, she certainly made her presence felt and was an active advisor for FDR while he was inching toward an interventionist foreign policy. Indeed, segments of the American public noticed Thompson's closeness with the White House. For example, on February 23, 1941, a group of women protesters who were members of the Mothers Crusade to Kill Bill 1776 (the lend-lease measure) picketed the White House.⁶⁹ The group had an effigy of Thompson which they tried to hang on the east entrance gate. The women claimed that they wanted "to give Dorothy to the White House for a present because she wants to give away a million of our boys [to the war]." The Dorothy effigy had a placard that read: "Eleanor R and Dottie T, too, With the greedy Sol Bloom-Hillman crew, are shouting to spend for war again, A

⁶⁷ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 12 July 1940, May-August folder, box 35, DT Papers.

⁶⁸ Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 332.

⁶⁹ "EFFIGY OF WRITER SEIZED IN CAPITAL: Anti-Aid-Bill Women Protest Dorothy Thompson's Stand," *New York Times*, February 24, 1941.

million boys' lives in blood and pain."⁷⁰ While the police seized the effigy, the message was clear: isolationists were not fans of Thompson, her relationship with the White House, her political opinions, and they affiliated her with Jewish leaders who they blamed for war. To the dismay of these protesters but to the delight of Thompson, finally, on May 27, 1941, FDR made a radio speech from a formal White House dinner that confirmed the administration's foreign policy. In the speech FDR stated that there was now an "unlimited national emergency" against Hitler's Germany.⁷¹ Thompson, who was in attendance at the dinner, led the applause during President Roosevelt's speech and while excitedly embracing fellow journalist Edgar Ansel Mowrer, she proclaimed, "I am sick with happiness."⁷²

Ring of Freedom

While Thompson was a powerful voice for intervention in her own journalism, through organizational work, and through advising FDR, she also mulled over the possibility of creating her own political organization that was pro-war but would also present a positive democratic vision for the western world – a platform that she thought could be the very antithesis of Nazism and truly rally the American people. At the same time, Frank Kingdon of the *New York Post* led an effort by a group that called itself the

⁷⁰ Sol Bloom, a member of the House of Representatives from New York, served as chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee from 1939 to 1947 and was in charge of authorizing Lend-Lease in 1941. Sidney Hillman, American labor leader, was a vocal opponent of Nazi Germany and supporter of US aid to Britain and France. In 1940 FDR appointed him to the National Defense Advisory Committee and names him associate director of the Office of Production Management in 1942.

⁷¹ "May 27, 1941: Fireside Chat 17: On An Unlimited National Emergency | Miller Center," October 20, 2016, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/may-27-1941-fireside-chat-17-unlimited-national-emergency>.

⁷² Mahl, *Desperate Deception*, 39.

Committee of 1000 to host a large dinner in Thompson's honor. On May 6, 1941, more than five hundred distinguished Americans gathered at the Hotel Astor in New York to praise Thompson "for her great services to [their] democracy and valiant battle against Nazism."⁷³ One guest, politician Ben Rosenthal, said, "I have for a long time regarded Dorothy Thompson as the outstanding woman of America... I believe her influence on public thought and affairs transcends that of any other individual outside of government and indeed I wish she were a part of it."⁷⁴ Interestingly, many comments about Thompson's suitability for the future presidency were made and a significant number of these suggestions were made by men.⁷⁵ Prime Minister Winston Churchill even offered congratulations at the dinner, writing that "she has shown what one valiant woman can do with the power of the pen. Freedom and humanity are grateful debtors."⁷⁶

At this event, instead of pausing to receive the honor she deserved, Thompson very characteristically used the dinner to further her interventionist and democratic mission. She used her speaking time to announce that America needed to be placed "on a total war footing" and revealed something she called her "Ten Articles of Faith," the basis of her idea for a political organization called the Ring of Freedom.⁷⁷ She declared that these Articles "sought to re-state the meaning of democracy, freedom, and internationalism."⁷⁸

⁷³ Telegram from Frank Kingdon to Franklin D. Roosevelt, April 3 1941, Folder: Thompson, Dorothy PPF 6650; President's Personal File 6643-667, Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt; FDR Library.

⁷⁴ Letter from Ben Rosenthal, 23 January 1939, Scrapbook 32: Letterbook 24 Jan 1939 - Dorothy Thompson honorary dinner, Oversized Material, DT Papers.

⁷⁵ Scrapbook 32: Letterbook 24 Jan 1939 - Dorothy Thompson honorary dinner, Oversized Material, DT Papers.

⁷⁶ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 273-74.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 274.

⁷⁸ Letter from Dorothy Thompson, 16 May 1941, May-August 1941 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, folder, DT Papers.

She herself was wearing a ring with “three circles held together by clasped hands over another small circle on which is etched the western hemisphere” with the US outlined within it.⁷⁹ She told the audience she had the ring made for herself to “remind me constantly, all the time, of the things to which I intend to be faithful...To me it symbolizes the loyal hope that this nation may be defended by clasped hands of millions of brothers, for the purpose of making it once again, as it has been before in history, the hope of the world.”⁸⁰ At the dinner she offered a duplicate ring to those who were interested in joining her new movement and who brought two additional people into the fold. Through this Thompson was intending to create chains of obligation to her democratic mission: “I believe that in this person-to-person way, we may begin the creation of a movement in America for a defense and reconstruction – not another committee, nor another party, but a brotherhood of dedicated human beings. Out of it, in time, organization may come. But people come before committees, an aim before a structure.”⁸¹ Thompson ended her speech stating that “destiny, my friends, is very near. But the man who will have to meet it first is the President of the United States.” With this she called on her audience to support FDR and to resist those trying to “stab him in the back” (i.e. isolationists and anti-internationalists). She declared that “the arms trying to stab him are in the form of Nazi salutes” and concluded by having the crowd pray for FDR to “have the strength to make

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Text from the May 6, 1941 dinner honoring Dorothy Thompson, Box 18, Folder Dorothy Thompson, FFFIR.

⁸¹ Ibid.

the right choice.”⁸² By this, Thompson meant the choice to enter the war to defend democracy.

Following Thompson’s speech and honorary dinner, thousands of letters from across the United States and Canada came in expressing desire to join her proposed organization. Thompson noted that “for such a response I was utterly unprepared ... I became convinced that it was my duty to carry on what I had begun, and immediately to seek help in doing so.”⁸³ On May 16 she wrote to those who had expressed interest, further declaring the purpose of the Ring of Freedom:

For too long America has taken a negative, or anti-position: Anti-communist; Anti-Nazi. The destructive forces at home and abroad can never be defeated in this way. America must take an offense, at home and abroad, in the field of ideas, ethics, programs...The opportunity is ripe for America to hold up a standard to which the wise and the just all over the world can repair... The ‘Ring of Freedom’ is an attempt to create a basis for clarity and cohesion around positive principles that are very ancient principles reinterpreted in terms of the present day and the present crisis.⁸⁴

In an individual letter to Tommy Dix, Thompson clarified her desire to start a political organization by stating that her main objective was “to defeat the America First Committee, Lindberghism, and make a new world while we are defending the one we have.”⁸⁵ In another letter, this time to William M. Forsythe, Thompson wrote about her opinion on American inaction,

I have been around this country a great deal in the last year, talking to all sorts of

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Letter from Dorothy Thompson, 16 May 1941, May-August 1941 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, folder, DT Papers.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Tommy Dix, 2 June 1941, May-August 1941 folder, box 35, outgoing correspondence, DT Papers.

audiences, and I became absolutely convinced that the apathy regarding this war is due to the fact that although the American people know what they are against, they are no longer certain what they are for.⁸⁶

Thompson believed she could re-vitalize the spirit of liberal internationalism by providing principles Americans could rally behind and improve the mood for war. Meyer Weisgal, who was Thompson's right hand man for the Ring of Freedom, recalled that "Her aim was to forge masses of people into a big democratic movement upon which the New World would be founded.... She spoke at hundreds of meetings and over the radio, urging all and sundry to unite in brotherhood and democracy and freedom. She was utterly indefatigable in her furious war on the indigenous and imported Nazis infesting America – a resounding voice calling for the American crusade on the side of the Allies."⁸⁷ Indeed, one of the original Ring pamphlets described the organization as a "call to action" for the American people. In the pamphlet Thompson defined democracy as "based upon a doctrine of personal rights, [which] implies a doctrine of personal obligations."⁸⁸ She accused America of inaction by saying, "We are not democrats. Let us see what we can do to make ourselves right."⁸⁹ The pamphlet also described the Ring as,

A movement of the free and for the free, and for those who are determined that the vision of humanity in which America was born, and in which it lives, shall continue to be our vision, widened and brightened and made manifest, and set upon a hill for all the world to see.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Mr. William M. Forsythe, 1 July 1941, May-August 1941 folder, box 35, outgoing correspondence, DT Papers.

⁸⁷ Weisgal, *Meyer Weisgal ... so Far: An Autobiography*, 196.

⁸⁸ The Ring of Freedom Pamphlet written by Dorothy Thompson, Introduction, Ring of Freedom folder, box 24, DT Papers.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

The scope of the Ring's program was certainly far-reaching, aiming to reposition America as an example for the rest of the world; As John Winthrop had envisioned in 1630, a City Upon a Hill. To realize America's historic and future vision, Thompson's principle aims were to (a) Support the President in his struggle against Hitler, on the basis of the American defense program; (b) Fight Hitlerism at home and abroad with new and better ideas, and thus furnish a counter-movement to Nazism; and (c) Work to end the class and race cleavages in America by rallying around a common aim and program.⁹¹ With these principles in mind she spent the majority of her summer working on recruiting for the Ring of Freedom by holding town halls where she proclaimed the need for action,

When we say 'stand before the world' we mean, stand, accepting the full responsibility of that stand: to resist what we know to be evil, and to resist with measures short of nothing; to build what we conceive to be good, together with all men in all lands who will go along with us. I begin by inviting you to join us.⁹²

After her first radio broadcast concerning the Ring's goals, she received another 5,000 letters asking to join⁹³ and by September the Ring's newsletter was regularly going out to 15,000 members.⁹⁴

Following the initial interest in the movement, Thompson realized she needed to make sure that her vision could sustain itself. She wanted this organization to be able to do

⁹¹ The Ring of Freedom Pamphlet written by Dorothy Thompson, A Call to Action IV, Ring of Freedom folder, box 24, DT Papers ; This thesis does not focus on Thompson's feelings about and initiatives for other race and class problems in the United States. This is covered more in previous biographies. While obsessed with anti-Nazism and fighting for the Jewish community, she was also interested in exposing bigots and racists of all kinds, frequently advocating for African Americans in her column and very much in alignment with Eleanor Roosevelt's views.

⁹² *New York Post* Article, Wednesday, 18 June 1941, Ring of Freedom folder, box 24, DT Papers.

⁹³ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to David Dubinsky, 1 July 1941, May-August 1941 folder, box 35, outgoing correspondence, DT Papers.

⁹⁴ Ring of Freedom Newsletter, 5 September 1941, Ring of Freedom Organizational Materials Folder, outgoing correspondence, box 24, DT Papers.

the work “that needs to be done and that the government either hasn’t gotten around to doing or it is afraid to do.”⁹⁵ In other words, she saw the Ring of Freedom as a public way to inspire Americans to want to join the war. Though she knew that the Ring had relative freedom compared to the political leaders in power, she was careful to balance the current political situation that Roosevelt found himself in, one in which there was “innumerable pressure from all directions.”⁹⁶

In June 1941, most of the Ring’s major contributors were Jewish.⁹⁷ As she watched this trend continue Thompson voiced her concerns about what this would mean for public reaction to the movement. She wrote to Meyer Weisgal, the Ring’s organizer and treasurer, the following passage:

For months I have gotten letters saying that the Ring of Freedom is a Jewish organization, and that I am being ‘used’ by the Jews... We have got to use our political sense and instinct. No organization appealing to the whole nation will ever succeed if it has the stamp of a minority group... we don’t reach the people who deeply believe -- rightly or not -- that they are the representative Americans... If the word gets around - rightly or wrongly- that the Ring is a Jewish organization, then it will fail ... I am in a position where I must combine courage with political intelligence.⁹⁸

Following this she wrote to Tom Lamont, another member of the Ring, stating that because of popular antisemitism and anti-war sentiment their organization could not be solely financed by American Jews; this is similar to her approach for funding earlier refugee initiatives. Instead, she argued that the Ring had to be represented by a wide variety of men

⁹⁵ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Tom Lamont, 1 October 1941, Sept-Dec 1941 folder, box 35, outgoing correspondence, DT Papers.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ring of Freedom Organizational Materials Ring of Freedom Income statement, 12 June 1941, Ring of Freedom Organizational Material folder, box 24, DT Papers and Weisgal, *So Far an Autobiography*, 196.

⁹⁸ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Meyer Weisgal, 28 September 1941, Sept-Dec 1942 folder, box 35, DT Papers.

and women in America with the goal to isolate America firsters by a “great wave of opinion,” united against isolationism.⁹⁹

On October 31, 1941, perhaps in an effort to remedy the accusations of the Ring being an outlet for Jewish war propaganda, Thompson announced that the Ring of Freedom would merge with the Fight for Freedom Committee, another popular organization that worked hard distributing interventionist literature across the country. With the hushed encouragement of President Roosevelt, these two groups coalesced to form Freedom House Inc., with the mission of promoting concrete application of the principles of freedom and house the scattered interventionist groups.¹⁰⁰ The new group invited any other like-minded organizations to join with them to form a strong democratic mouthpiece.¹⁰¹ Thompson became co-chairperson and was one of many prominent names associated with the creation of the Freedom House organization, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Wendell Willkie, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia to name a few. Thompson wrote in her announcement that “military resistance to Hitler is futile unless it is accompanied by an aggressive and constructive attempt to define the terms of Freedom for all peoples.”¹⁰² She and the other founders believed that Freedom House could lead the western world forward ideologically. Rather than a political organization, Freedom House was branded as an educational institution that

⁹⁹ Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Tom Lamont, 1 October 1941, Sept-Dec 1941 folder, box 35, outgoing correspondence, DT Papers.

¹⁰⁰ “By-Laws, Freedom House, Inc.,” December 18, 1941, Freedom House Records, Box 1, Folder By Laws, 1941, 1966, Manuscripts Division, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University Library ; Letter to Mr. Sulzberger from George Field, November 4, 1941, George Field Records, Box 2, Folder inauguration of Freedom House 1941, Manuscripts Division, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University Library.

¹⁰¹ Johnstone, *Against Immediate Evil*, 175.

¹⁰² Ring of Freedom Newsletter Ring of Freedom Newsletter, 29 October 1941, Sept-Dec 1941 folder, outgoing correspondence, box 35, DT Papers.

was the counter to Hitler's Braunes Haus, the NSDAP headquarters, in Munich. The original by-laws of Freedom House were as follows:

To stand as a symbol and center for the two-fold fight for freedom: to define this two-fold fight both in terms of resisting the totalitarian movement now threatening civilization and in terms of the aspirations of all peoples for a world of freedom, peace and security; to promote the concrete application of the principles of freedom and democracy in the every-day affairs of the USA governmental and otherwise, so that by sacrifices, intelligence and justice, this country can be an example to both the present and post-war world of democracy at its best; to encourage all democracies, including the captive countries, to look to Freedom House in the USA as a beacon of lighting the struggle for a free world; to act as a headquarters and clearing house for organizations enlisted in the fight for freedom, whether at home or abroad; to disseminate literature bearing on the above aims; to serve as a coordinating center for such subordinate centers as may be established anywhere, to make the symbolism of Freedom House plain to the world.¹⁰³

It is evident that Freedom House was not only an institution to resist totalitarianism, it also actively promoted a world of freedom, peace, and security based on the principle of democracy.¹⁰⁴ With these guidelines, Freedom House continued to champion democracy and in 1944, Thompson was chosen to serve as the president. Though, as a woman who fiercely “[stuck] to her principles,”¹⁰⁵ she did not stay long, as she believed that the organization was straying too far from the original roots of individual action that she had planted with the Ring of Freedom.¹⁰⁶ After this, Dorothy Thompson remained a board member and Freedom House has endured to the present day, still spreading the original vision by researching, tracking, and evaluating freedom and democracy around the world.

¹⁰³ “By-Laws, Freedom House, Inc,” December 18, 1941, Freedom House Records, Box 1, Folder By Laws, 1941, 1966, Manuscripts Division, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University Library.

¹⁰⁴ Johnstone, *Against Immediate Evil*, 175.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from George B. Ford to Dorothy Thompson, 20 December 1944, Freedom House, Inc. (George Field) folder, incoming correspondence, box 11, DT Papers.

¹⁰⁶ Press release “Dorothy Thompson New Head of Freedom House,” 13 March 1944, Freedom House, Inc. (George Field) folder, incoming correspondence, box 11, DT Papers.

The Fall of France and the Formation of the Emergency Rescue Committee

As interventionist groups that were aided by the British and quietly supported by FDR attempted to sway American opinion in support of war, the Allies suffered a tremendous blow in Europe, which reinvigorated concerns about Jewish and anti-Nazi refugees. After the fall of France in June 1940, refugees by the thousands fled to the unoccupied southern zone. However, this proved a problem as a new French government was set up at Vichy under Marshall Philippe Petain. Petain made an armistice with Germany that required the French to surrender refugees to the Third Reich.¹⁰⁷ This dire situation for refugees inspired increased pressure from the American pro-refugee lobby to help people who now desperately needed to be rescued from falling back into the Nazis' clutches. At this point FDR allowed some 12 to 15 thousand refugees who had entered the country with visitors' visas to have their papers extended six months and refused to expel them when they expired.¹⁰⁸ However, while this act showed what executive power could do, it was not enough to change the situation in France. As one might expect, Thompson believed the United States could do more and, once again, was at the forefront of the new phase of the movement for rescuing refugees.¹⁰⁹

Thompson and others in American intellectual circles who sympathized with Jews in Europe were inclined to act on behalf of those who were trapped in France and in danger of becoming interned in concentration camps.¹¹⁰ Because of this, a lobbying group formed

¹⁰⁷ Varian Fry, *Assignment Rescue* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1993), 12.

¹⁰⁸ Krispyn, *Anti-Nazi Writers*, 106.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid and Dorothy Thompson, *Kassandra Spricht: Antifaschistische Publizistik 1932-1942*, ed. Juergen Schebera (Wiesbaden: Fourier Verlag, 1988), 21.

¹¹⁰ Article on the Emergency Rescue Committee, 1965, Varian Fry Papers (Box 8, Folder Varian Fry), University Archives, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries [Hereafter VF Papers].

to push for liberalization of immigration laws.¹¹¹ Much of the new pressure for action was on behalf of refugees deemed “important” to save – those who were key figures in European intellectual, cultural, political, and artistic life. This group of refugees, while nearly all Jewish, were designated as “political refugees” who were seen as “persons of outstanding character and reputation with intellectual accomplishment in the learned profession.”¹¹² The group of concerned Americans hoped to save these enemies of the Reich by getting them out of France before they were seized by the Gestapo.¹¹³ Thompson played a particularly important role guiding this group because she had the connections to necessary people who could make action possible.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of those who were concerned about the fate of European refugees were connected to, or on the board of, the PACOPR – the very committee that Thompson had singlehandedly urged the State Department and FDR to create two years earlier. In late June 1940, Dorothy Thompson and William Allen Neilson, then president of Smith College,¹¹⁴ teamed up with concerned political refugees who were already in the United States (such as Thomas and Erika Mann and Stefan Zweig),¹¹⁵ the American Guild for German Cultural Freedom, Alvin Johnson of the New School for Social Research, and representatives from trade unions and Jewish organizations to appeal to the PACOPR to find a way to rescue as many people as possible trapped in France.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Klein, *Conscience, Conflict and Politics*, 287.

¹¹² Zucker, *In Search of Refuge*, 54.

¹¹³ Fry, *Assignment Rescue*, 13.

¹¹⁴ Article on the Emergency Rescue Committee, 1965, Box 8, Folder Varian Fry, VF Papers.

¹¹⁵ Krispyn, *Anti-Nazi Writers*, 106.

¹¹⁶ Klein, *Conscience, Conflict and Politics*, 288 and Zucker, *In Search of Refuge*, 55.

At the time of the proposal, the PACOPR was relatively inactive. Due to the continuation of restrictive US immigration and the Intergovernmental Committee for Refugees failure to negotiate with Hitler, they had not produced any significant solutions for refugees. Because of this, when approached by the above group of people with a new mission to rescue more than 2,000 specific refugees, the PACOPR had little choice but to comply – especially since the Committee was intended to function as an intermediary between the US administration, refugee relief organizations, and International Committee for Refugees. On June 19, 1940, PACOPR committee member and Thompson’s trusted friend and editor, Hamilton Fish Armstrong, wrote to FDR worried about what “will happen to the flower of French intellectual life when Germany secures control of all of France.”¹¹⁷ He informed the president that with the help of the concerned citizens, the PACOPR would be “preparing for the State Department a list of outstanding persons likely to be in particular danger so that American diplomatic and consular officials in France could be instructed to offer asylum where possible and facilitate their leaving [the] country...the lives of as many as possible should be saved by prompt American action.”¹¹⁸

On June 22, 1940, the PACOPR did just what Armstrong said they would. They presented the list of the most famous emigres in Europe to the White House. In addition, the Jewish Labor Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and a group of Orthodox rabbis added more than 700 names to the proposed list.¹¹⁹ The White House, egged on by Eleanor Roosevelt, quietly approved the PACOPR to work with the concerned group of

¹¹⁷ Telegram from Hamilton Fish Armstrong to FDR, June 19, 1940, Box 77, Folder Organizations and Committees, President's Advisory Committee Jan-June 1940, HFA Papers.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Klein, *Conscience, Conflict and Politics*, 287- 88.

citizens and representatives on a rescue plan and authorized a limited emergency visa program through the State Department. Since the United States did not have any type of special asylum law, this initiative was a quiet way to work around the current restrictions and it was supposed to operate outside the confines of the quota system. The fact that, for a second time, Thompson's pressure on the executive branch inspired actual action suggests where success, however limited, could be achieved in an isolationist and anti-immigration atmosphere. With executive backing, the emergency visa program was intended to ensure a fast and relatively bureaucracy-free rescue process since the visas were granted directly by the State Department and did not depend on arbitrary decisions from consuls.¹²⁰ Despite this innovation, the State Department Visa Division did all it could to bog down the program with bureaucracy with a new focus on the political reliability of refugees.

To save the proposed refugees, on June 25, Thompson and the other representatives formalized their mission by creating the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC) – the body which would work in partnership with the PACOPR to obtain emergency visas and facilitate the exit of refugees from Vichy France, with which the US still had diplomatic relations.¹²¹ The ERC created an office located at 122 East 42nd St. in New York City and they began churning out pamphlets about their mission. For example, they declared that the refugees “live in day-to-day fear of German occupation of the rest of ‘free’ France.... Their only hope is America!”¹²² The ERC truly believed that their work offered a chance

¹²⁰ Ibid, 288-91.

¹²¹ “602 Lives: The First Year of the Emergency Rescue Committee,” pamphlet, Box 8, Folder Emergency Rescue Committee, VF Papers.

¹²² “Wanted by the Gestapo,” pamphlet, Box 8, Folder Emergency Rescue Committee, VF Papers.

to aid “the future of liberty among mankind.”¹²³ They argued that rescue would enrich American life by the talents of these refugees and that such action would be “America’s triumph” over Nazism.¹²⁴

The ERC was reliant on American philanthropic funding to sponsor the proposed refugees. Luckily, they had a number of highly skilled and connected women working on this goal. Dorothy Thompson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins worked quietly behind the scenes to provide the economic sponsorships and the political assurances for each refugee they intended to save.¹²⁵ Their connections made the ERC possible and it was largely funded by the Rosenwald, Warburg, and Marshall families.¹²⁶ In addition, these women helped set up benefits such as dances, brunches, and dinners where all proceeds went to the ERC’s work for refugees.¹²⁷ Beyond this, when refugees arrived in the United States, Thompson threw receptions and welcome dinners for them.¹²⁸ Beyond the financial work, these women were also constantly in the ears of various men working for the ERC, the PACOPR, and the State Department – influencing them to

¹²³ 602 Lives: The First Year of the Emergency Rescue Committee,” pamphlet, Box 8, Folder Emergency Rescue Committee, VF Papers.

¹²⁴ “This is America’s Triumph,” pamphlet, Box 8, Folder Emergency Rescue Committee, VF Papers.

¹²⁵ Klein, *Conscience, Conflict and Politics*, 293.

¹²⁶ Sheila Isenberg, *A Hero of Our Own: The Story of Varian Fry* (New York: Random House, 2001) ; The Rosenwald family, were founders of Sears, Roebuck and Company and the Rosenwald Fund, which donated millions in matching funds to support the education of African American children in the rural South, as well as other philanthropic causes in the 20th century. The Warburg family was a prominent German and American banking family that was heavily involved with philanthropy, specifically for Jewish refugees. The Marshall family gained money from investments in the oil industry and donated to such funds as the Emergency Rescue Committee.

¹²⁷ Advertisements for Dinners, Dances, Breakfasts, Box 8, Folder Emergency Rescue Committee, VF Papers.

¹²⁸ Advertisements for Welcome Dinner, October 31, 1940, Box 8, Folder Emergency Rescue Committee, VF Papers.

approve as many emergency visas as possible and stepping in if refugees needed further affidavits or assurances.

ERC Operations on the Ground

The ERC, through the PACOPR, made arrangements with the State Department to go above the standard immigration quotas to provide emergency rescue visas which would be given to the selected refugees. For this process to work, the ERC and the PACOPR were responsible for processing all proper paperwork, including affidavits and assurances from American sponsors that the refugees were “safe” to bring into the country.¹²⁹ For the emergency program, the refugee needed a regular affidavit guaranteeing economic autonomy as well as a new affidavit of sponsorship that certified that they were politically reliable – in other words, they could not have fascist sympathies, have been part of a left-wing group, or had membership in the communist party, indicative of the growing fears among the American public about a potential fifth column.¹³⁰ Finally, the refugee needed a detailed curriculum vitae written by an American citizen who could speak about their potential contribution to American culture.¹³¹ While the emergency program was streamlined to rescue people faster, coming up with this extra paperwork was clearly a significant undertaking that still took incredible effort.

To facilitate this process and to provide all these necessary assurances, the ERC formed two branches; one in the United States to deal with paperwork and the State

¹²⁹ Zucker, *In Search of Refuge*, 55.

¹³⁰ Klein, *Conscience, Conflict and Politics*, 291.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

Department, and the other on the ground in Marseilles, France to locate those granted special visas and to help them deal with the European side of the visa process.¹³² In order to be given a visa, the selected refugee had to be located and a complete immigration application had to be filled out and sent to New York, where it would pass through the ERC bureau to gain all necessary American affidavits and assurances, then the PACOPR would check the application, and finally it would be sent to the State Department Visa Division for official approval or denial.

To facilitate the operations on the ground in France, the ERC elected to send thirty-two-year-old journalist Varian Fry as an underground agent. He left to begin the rescue operation on August 15, 1940¹³³ and he had a cover story which said he was working for the International YMCA going to aid refugees.¹³⁴ When he left New York his pockets were “full of lists of men and women I was to rescue, and my head full of suggestions on how to do it” and \$3,000.¹³⁵ Once there, he set up a small operation to locate the people he needed to find and help them begin the application process. Unfortunately, things on his end were slow and the French bureaucracy prevented swift action. He challenged local consuls and openly criticized their slow and bureaucratic methods of processing visa applications. Disillusioned by this slow pace, he began using illegal methods to get the refugees out of the country by smuggling them through Spain to Lisbon or on freighters to North Africa.¹³⁶ Fry described the operation as “an illegal one – or, as we preferred to call

¹³² Ibid, 288.

¹³³ Article on the Emergency Rescue Committee, 1965, Box 8, Folder Varian Fry, VF Papers.

¹³⁴ Fry, *Assignment Rescue*, 13.

¹³⁵ Article on the Emergency Rescue Committee, 1965, Box 8, Folder Varian Fry, VF Papers ; Fry, *Assignment Rescue*, 28 ; Sheila Isenberg, *A Hero of Our Own: The Story of Varian Fry* (New York: Random House, 2001).

¹³⁶ Article on the Emergency Rescue Committee, 1965, Box 8, Folder Varian Fry, VF Papers.

it, an ‘extralegal’ one – a business of false identity papers, false passports, false visas, secret hideaways, clandestine meetings, secret passwords and other and better ways of distinguishing friends and clients from police agents and spies.”¹³⁷ Within weeks of his arrival, the American diplomatic corps in France launched a campaign to have him leave and, concerned for the relationship between the US and France, State Department officials in Washington also pressed the ERC to willingly recall him.¹³⁸

Problems for the ERC

In its first year of operation the ERC and Fry saved nearly 700 refugees and raised more than \$215,000 for their work.¹³⁹ The financial contributions came from 4,870 individuals from every US state, Canada, Mexico, the West Indies and the Panama Canal Zone – showing the popular reach this organization had.¹⁴⁰ However, despite this success, the ERC ran into problems while working with the State Department Visa Division. Issues began even before Fry started using illegal means to smuggle out refugees. Although the ERC was submitting all the necessary affidavits and assurances for refugee applications, when the PACOPR brought them to the State Department, many were being routinely denied.¹⁴¹ For example, out of a list of 567 refugees submitted in June 1940, only 15 people were issued visas by August. Moreover, on September 19, Breckenridge Long, known antisemite, of the Visa Division sent a circular telegram to Diplomatic and Consular

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 246 and Fry, *Assignment: Rescue*, 92.

¹³⁹ “602 Lives: The First Year of the Emergency Rescue Committee,” pamphlet, Box 8, Folder Emergency Rescue Committee, VF Papers.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Zucker, *In Search of Refuge*, 56.

Offices in Lisbon, Oporto, Marseilles, Bordeaux, London, Zurich, Lyon, Nice, Casablanca, Moscow and Stockholm to specify that refugee cases should be “carefully examine[d]” regarding “the applicants’ past and future activities and... the aliens’ status as refugee intellectuals or labor leaders or refugees in particular danger.” The telegram ended with the directive to suspend cases “if any doubts exist.”¹⁴² The reluctance shown here was not the way the emergency rescue program was intended to operate and because of this, PACOPR chairman and Thompson’s good friend, James McDonald, was furious.

McDonald consulted Dorothy Thompson about the ongoing struggles with the State Department trying to deny applicants that the ERC and the PACOPR had worked to vet and approve. In a letter to Thompson, he angrily reported that he would soon need to tell her the “full story of recent developments in the efforts to break down the resistance in certain quarters to the rescue of the sorely pressed political refugees.”¹⁴³ It is unknown how Thompson reacted to this information, but it is likely that she also felt McDonald’s frustration. On September 14, McDonald and the PACOPR secretary, George Warren, protested Long’s actions to Secretary of State Cordell Hull and reported the same information to FDR on October 8. They wrote: “The Consuls must be the final judges, but the President’s Advisory Committee, from its knowledge of those sponsoring the persons recommended [Thompson and others in the ERC], cannot believe that those still without visas present threats to the national interest....”¹⁴⁴ Through Eleanor Roosevelt, McDonald had a meeting with FDR on October 9 and revealed the full story of what was happening

¹⁴² Ibid, 211.

¹⁴³ Letter from James McDonald to Dorothy Thompson, Sept 18, 1940, Box 4, Folder 383 Dorothy Thompson 1936-42, JM Papers.

¹⁴⁴ Zucker, *In Search of Refuge*, 57.

between the ERC/PACOPR and the State Department. The next day McDonald thanked Eleanor Roosevelt for her help and seemed assured that FDR would redirect the State Department's actions in a way that would expedite "the rescue of those in imminent peril." FDR even seemed to tell McDonald that he knew the ERC and the PACOPR were always acting out of loyalty to him and obligation to their consciences.¹⁴⁵

Breckenridge Long did not stay silent on the matter either. He told FDR that Jewish pressure was being exerted on the press to create the ERC which he felt undermined the State Department. He also insisted that the PACOPR had "expanded the boundaries of political and intellectual refugees and failed to do sufficient checking whether they might pose a risk to the US if admitted." Long also reported a false account of visas issued thus far, claiming that he had approved more than 500 when the reality was a mere 15.¹⁴⁶ It seems that FDR sided with McDonald and the ERC/PACOPR, revealing that executive intervention with the State Department was key for a successful mission to save Jewish refugees. However, it was not the end of the ERC/PACOPR's problems with the State Department.

Dorothy Thompson was present throughout the communications between the ERC, PACOPR, and the State Department. With her connections to those in the State Department, she tried to hurry along the bureaucratic process as much as she could and her successes and failures demonstrate the possibilities and limits of action within the only US government approved emergency refugee program during the Second World War. The

¹⁴⁵ Letter from James McDonald to Eleanor Roosevelt, October 10, 1940, Box 32, Folder Eleanor Roosevelt, JM Papers.

¹⁴⁶ Zucker, *In Search of Refuge*, 212.

story of the ERC and Thompson's individual role in its success highlights the difficulty of creating a greater government response, and the problems that existed within that already limited space. Again showcasing the importance of exerting individual pressure to see results, Thompson personally intervened with the State Department to streamline the process if it was delayed or if visas were being denied. A common type of refugee communication that Thompson had is shown in a letter from Robert T. Thoren from February 1941. He wrote to her saying the following:

My wife and myself are terribly worried about the danger my wife's parents are in, They both are in unoccupied France and my father in law, Mr. Victor Tischler, a well-known Austrian painter, menaced with deportation to Poland, which would mean the end. Mr. Tischler is in real danger because he illustrated several anti-Nazi books and figures on the nazi black list. He and his wife were already several times interned in different concentration camps, but are actually free at St. Raphael. The Emergency Rescue Committee in New York on which board you are, took the matter up and advised us on January 14th that the case of Mr. and Mrs. Victor Tischler was through the President's Advisory Committee submitted to the State Department in Washington and that both Committees hope that the Visas will be rapidly granted.

He continued by saying that the important file was supposedly never received at the Visa Division of the State Department and asked Thompson if she would "be kind enough to send a personal wire... using her [authority] to recommend the case of Mr. and Mrs. Victor Tischler."¹⁴⁷ In a margin of the letter Thompson hand-wrote that she had personally wired the State Department to clear up this matter on February 4th. As a result, the Tischlers were granted entrance into the United States and survived. This story exemplifies a common action that Thompson performed. She was able to use her personal clout and influence to hurry along, or in some cases solve, refugee cases that were either backlogged or ignored

¹⁴⁷ Letter from Robert T. Thoren to Dorothy Thompson, 1 February 1941, Taf-Thy folder, incoming correspondence, box 28, DT Papers.

by the State Department. Thompson's logistical activities and persuasions on the American end of the operation allowed families such as the Tischlers to benefit from the ERC and escape a truly dim fate. This type of individual action was necessary at every step to keep the rescue operation afloat – Thompson was merely one voice among many who contributed to the ERC's survival and the relative success of the emergency rescue program.

However, because the goals of the emergency rescue program for refugees were not easily accepted by the State Department and individuals like Breckenridge Long attempted to sink the operation, Thompson was not always successful with persuading them to grant visas. One case where this is clear is the saga of German-Jewish journalist and newspaper editor, Theodor Wolff. In February 1941, Thompson was working through the ERC to allow the Wolff family to escape to the US. She made personal funds available to help them financially with the emigration and provided their American assurances. After the Wolff's application for visas was denied and Thompson could not make any headway with the State Department, she sent them an additional \$500 to survive in France.¹⁴⁸ Unfortunately, due to the Wolffs being denied refuge in the US and the ERC's mission being continuously blocked by the State Department, Theodor Wolff was captured by the Gestapo and taken to Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he contracted phlegmon. Soon after he died in the Jewish Hospital in Berlin. His widow and children, who were in "bitter need," managed to remain in France and Dorothy Thompson, separate from the

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Dr. S. Rieser to Dorothy Thompson, 22 November 1944, Rid-Rud folder, incoming correspondence, box 24, DT Papers.

ERC, continued to send financial support.¹⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Thompson as an individual only had so much power to change the decisions of those in higher positions or those granting visas – a consistent problem for refugee aid and rescue during the Holocaust. No matter how influential an individual might have been or how much they believed in their mission to rescue Jews from Hitler’s clutches, the larger political forces and structures did not always bend to the will of an individual actor.

Beyond the various issues that Thompson and other ERC individuals were navigating on the American side of the mission, there were also serious obstacles on the European side of the operation. In addition to the American affidavits and assurances which were hard to pass by the State Department Visa Division, legally the refugees needed to acquire paperwork which Vichy was also typically denying.¹⁵⁰ The refugees needed a valid passport, a French exit visa, a Spanish and Portuguese transit visa, an American immigration visa, the different affidavits of American citizens, and the proof of a paid passage.¹⁵¹ In most cases, at least one of these documents had to be forged and this is why Varian Fry began to operate illegally, breaching the ERC’s official relationship with the Vichy regime and the US State Department.¹⁵² During the first six months of operation, almost the entire budget that the ERC made in the US was being sent to fund these illegal activities – this fact was not made public in the US out of fear of loss of support.¹⁵³ However, this underground work was difficult to keep hidden and the US bureau of the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid ; Other communications of DT and PACOPR can be found in personal papers, such as Letter from James McDonald to Dorothy Thompson, September 5, 1941, Box 4, Folder Dorothy Thompson 1936-42, JM Papers.

¹⁵⁰ Klein, *Conscience, Courage, and Politics*, 296.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 298.

¹⁵² Ibid, 297.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 302.

ERC was increasingly pressured by the State Department to adhere to legal means of rescue and recall Fry.¹⁵⁴

The ERC responded with an aggressive campaign to allow Fry to keep operating, however, given the wider political worries about the US diplomatic relationship with foreign governments, the State Department urged him to return home. On May 13, 1941, Eleanor Roosevelt sadly agreed with this assessment, writing to the ERC saying that “I think he will have to come home because he has done things which the government does not feel it can stand behind.”¹⁵⁵ A revealing letter to the director of the Museum of Modern Art, who had contributed funding to the ERC, tells us that the State Department, in opposition to the wishes of the ERC, made the decision not to renew Fry’s passport – making the ERC operation more risky.¹⁵⁶ The ERC responded with protest.

Leading member and another close friend to Thompson, Frank Kingdon, wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt on July 2, 1941.¹⁵⁷ He informed her of the ongoing struggles the ERC had with the State Department still refusing to grant enough visas and now their role in trying to recall Fry. He wrote that they had only given out 366 visas despite how “extremely careful” the ERC and PACOPR had been in checking the cases before accepting them: “Our Checking Committee is composed of about ten people.... All these people are reliable, not only as far as their information is concerned, but also as to their own personal political background and viewpoint.”¹⁵⁸ Kingdon complained that applications were still

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 303.

¹⁵⁵ Fry, *Surrender on Demand*, 251.

¹⁵⁶ Letter from Office of Director, Museum of Modern Art, May 9, 1941, Box 8, Folder Expulsion from France, 1941, VF Papers.

¹⁵⁷ Letter to Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt from Frank Kingdon, July 2, 1941, Box 27, Folder 6, Emergency Rescue Committee 1941, FFFIR.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

being ignored and sent back to the ERC, endangering the lives of hundreds waiting for approval. Further, the State Department also instituted new conditions that refused visas for people who had relatives in Germany – an obvious issue for many Jewish refugees who had earlier left Germany and Austria and were now stuck in unoccupied France. Kingdon alluded to this issue as well, urging that “some relaxation and flexibility of the immigration regulations should be permitted.”¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately, this communication did not change anything and the more stringent wishes of the State Department were honored.

By August, Fry was in severe danger; he was arrested by the Vichy government on August 29, 1941 and ordered expelled.¹⁶⁰ By this time, Fry had managed to help more than 700 refugees escape, many by illegal means, and while the operation was not as successful without Fry, the ERC sent another person to continue facilitating the European work. This time the operation remained legal and it continued for nearly another year until it was raided by Vichy police.¹⁶¹ Almost immediately after the ERC was forced to cease operation, one of the most terrifying manhunts in all history began in Vichy zones in August 1942¹⁶² – “men, women and children of Jewish ancestry were rounded up by the police, packed into cattle cars, and sent off to Poland to be exterminated.”¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ 602 Lives: The First Year of the Emergency Rescue Committee,” pamphlet, Box 8, Folder Emergency Rescue Committee, VF Papers.

¹⁶¹ Article on the Emergency Rescue Committee, 1965, Box 8, Folder Varian Fry, VF Papers and Fry, *Assignment: Rescue*, 185.

¹⁶² “The Deportation of the Jews from France | Wwww.Yadvashem.Org,” accessed June 2, 2020, [deportation-from-france.html](https://www.yadvashem.org/en/education/learning-materials/the-deportation-of-the-jews-from-france.html).

¹⁶³ Fry, *Assignment Rescue*, 185.

The Results and Implications of the ERC Operation

As historian Anne Klein has pointed out, the ERC mission and its accomplishments were remarkable considering the challenging environment it was up against: “not only had an extraordinary team succeeded in building up a functioning refugee relief operation at a time of severe political instability, but American citizens... had, to a great extent, sponsored the escape work.”¹⁶⁴ Rightfully so Varian Fry has received the most praise and attention for his heroic actions on the ground in France,¹⁶⁵ but the full story of the ERC reveals that an entire team of individuals and their interventions for refugees caused the success of the emergency program. Their work should also be validated and recognized, because without the vision, committee structure, and the New York bureau’s ability to fundraise and provide convincing applications, it is unlikely that this many refugees would have been saved.

Dorothy Thompson had a prominent role in the ERC mission – from urging the creation of the PACOPR which accepted the idea to implement a special rescue program, to being a leading founder of the ERC, to fund-raising and working behind the scenes on the New York end, and finally, her personal connections and individual interventions with the State Department to ensure successful emigration for as many people as she could. For example, through her work with the ERC and personal communications with the State Department, Thompson was responsible for the emigration of at least the following individuals and families: the Tischlers who were already mentioned, novelist Heinrich and historian Golo Mann, novelist, playwright and poet Franz Werfel, expressionist writer

¹⁶⁴ Klein, *Conscience, Courage, and Politics*, 303.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Leonhard Frank, writer and poet Andre Breton, artist Marc Chagall, artist Max Ernst, and author Jozef Wittlin.¹⁶⁶ On a wider scale, the ERC and the PACOPR managed to save nearly 2,000 refugees during their two years of operation and there is proof that at least 183 refugees were financially supported by the ERC after their applications were denied by the State Department and they were forced to remain in Europe.¹⁶⁷ Individuals, such as Thompson, who worked behind the scenes making quiet interventions to secure funding and who fought against restrictive policies and arbitrary decisions intended to save as many lives as they could.

Even if the ERC could not rescue more refugees, it was on the right side of history – demanding that the US response needed to be proactive and guided by conscience. When the State Department did not follow this same urgent and moral line, those affiliated with the ERC and PACOPR relied on their own judgement and established their own moral standards that decided that human lives deserved to be saved despite legal restrictions and political wishes. This type of bravery and persistence in the face of apathy – and active reluctance from Breckenridge Long and the Visa Division – was novel and it tangibly changed the fate of hundreds who were able to escape to the US.

Beyond the immediate impact of the ERC and its benefits to some 2,000 refugees, the emergency program also has wider historical implications worth mentioning. As examined in chapter 4 and earlier in this chapter, the struggles that existed for Jewish refugees wishing to evade the increasingly dangerous environment in Hitler's Europe made

¹⁶⁶ Thompson, *Kassandra Spricht*, 21.

¹⁶⁷ Klein, *Conscience, Courage, and Politics*, 295. Klein notes that in the archives of the Deutsche Bibliothek, Frankfurt am Main, one can find the dossiers of 183 refugees, 47 women and 136 men, who were supported by the ERC after 1940 (DB EB 73/21).

for a difficult time reaching American shores. This difficulty was due to a complex mixture of American antisemitism and immigration restriction that involved notions of racial difference, and increasingly, the fear of political sabotage. In the historical shift of American immigration policy being based on racial origins (culminating in the 1924 immigration act) and then transforming to political reliability (beginning during WWII), Jews trying to escape Hitler were caught in the crossfire. Dorothy Thompson had commented on this irony for years, addressing mass audiences about the Nazi-like mindset to view Jews as a degenerate race, while also calling for the urgency of “political” asylum for those fleeing fascism. However, while Thompson’s approach favored anyone wanting to escape fascist regimes, others were more wary about the impact this would have on American democracy; many worried about political reliability and the potential of spies, especially after the start of the war. During the interwar years and the war itself, Jews trying to emigrate were met with skepticism and blatant antisemitism, and overwhelmingly, they were not welcome in the United States. Although Thompson’s refugee advocacy and her internationalist democratic mindset helped push along the historical evolution of immigration policy, the process was too slow to benefit Jews when they needed it most.

While the ERC program went beyond regular quotas and was a beacon of light for 2,000 people, regulations that the State Department created for its operation had consequences that increasingly determined immigration by politics. When confronted with the special ERC program, the State Department was able to make an initial experiment in immigration restriction through politics.¹⁶⁸ The new protocols that the State Department

¹⁶⁸ Klein, *Conscience, Courage, and Politics*, 293.

used for those applying for visas through the ERC were specifically intended to vet immigrants by political involvement. Rather than placing a focus on nationality, health, and economic independence (though they carefully reviewed these traits as well), the State Department “focused on the political convictions of the applicant.”¹⁶⁹ This part of the investigation was what slowed down the visa granting process and forced the ERC/PACOPR to continuously complain about State Department sabotage. The newly instituted political vetting further created an image of refugees as potential threats to American democracy – blocking many innocent Jewish refugees from a safe haven and trapping them inside Nazi Europe where the Final Solution was soon underway. In June 1941, the Bloom-Van Nuys Bill took the State Department's strict regulations and procedure for the ERC program and generalized them for the normal immigration process.¹⁷⁰ Now, regular immigrants needed a biographical sketch, the moral affidavit and financial guarantees and Consuls were fully authorized to withhold visas if they had any reason to believe an applicant may be politically unreliable or endanger public safety in the United States.

The struggles that the ERC/PACOPR had with the State Department speak to the wider shift of immigration law. While this shift was gradual, Jews during the 1930s and the Second World War were uniquely hurt by both approaches because the vetting process considered standard makers of nationality and economic independence, while adding in the new layer of political trustworthiness. The ERC operation also certainly speaks to the

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 305.

persistence of some Americans to rescue refugees despite these official policies, and it happened just in time before Jews were no longer allowed to leave after August 1942. In addition, the fears of ERC members about what would happen to those who were left in Hitler's Europe reveal a certain awareness of increasing danger and violence toward Jews and political enemies of Nazism. Unfortunately, this rescue operation, as exemplary as it was, still faced immense State Department pushback throughout its two years of operation, only to be forced to shut down in the midst of the Holocaust.

While simultaneously leading the charge for the ERC mission, building up the Ring of Freedom to improve American war morale, and acting as an advisor to FDR, Dorothy Thompson also continued her specific battle against the Neutrality Act that she had spoken against for years. After many unanswered personal pleas to the FDR administration and congress, she took this fight to the American masses with the hope that enough public support could finally force political action. On September 24, 1941 Thompson held an event to protest neutrality at Carnegie Hall. She organized effectively as an overflow crowd was in attendance, 4,000 audience members inside and more than 3,000 outside in the streets.¹⁷¹ At this event Thompson announced a "Petition to Congress to Strengthen the Foreign and Internal Situation of the United States." The petition declared,

The Neutrality Act hampers our freedom of action and we note with distress that a small minority, whose methods parallel those which have caused disunion and defeat in many countries, seek to weaken the authority of the Administration and disrupt the unity of the nation by appeals to petty partisanship, by open and veiled attempts to stir up racial and sectional antipathies, and by the use of organized

¹⁷¹ "Miss Thompson Warns U.S. to Wake Up" article, *New York Post*, Thursday 5 September 1941, Ring of Freedom Organizational Materials folder, box 24, DT Papers.

economic intimidation, such as the boycott, by which they attempt to terrorize free speech and free action.¹⁷²

As this petition shows, Thompson had grown tired of the lack of political action against the foreign threat of Nazism and the internal threats of antisemitism and isolationism inside the United States. In October, Thompson continued her political push with Wendell Willkie and Mayor La Guardia. They held a rally at Madison Square Garden to support President Roosevelt's interventionist foreign policy and demanded entrance into the war.¹⁷³ In an atmosphere of apathy she tried every avenue she could think of to invoke action.

Though the powers-that-be did not heed all her advice, the various intervention and pro-democracy organizations with which she was involved, her importance to the British propaganda operation, her closeness with FDR, and her forcefulness which resulted in tangible refugee rescue, show that Thompson did not go unnoticed by the decision makers. As many newspaper reports and stacks of fan mail suggest, to many liberal leaning Americans Thompson was seen as a leader who championed their beliefs and created avenues for activism in a fervently isolationist America. However, despite the work she did and the push from many other liberals, interventionists, and refugee activists, it was not until the United States was attacked at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, that the majority of Americans put their weight behind the war cause, and the fate of Europe's Jews was far from center stage in that rallying call. After the country's entrance into World War II, Thompson continued to be an outstanding voice for democratic ideals, aided wartime

¹⁷² Manuscript of the Petition to Congress to Strengthen the Foreign and Internal Situation of the United States, adopted at Carnegie Hall, 24 September 1941, Ring of Freedom Organizational Materials folder, box 24, DT Papers.

¹⁷³ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 277.

initiatives, and believed in and reported on the truth and gravity of the Holocaust before many others.

CHAPTER 7: ACTIONS DURING THE HOLOCAUST AND RELATIONSHIP WITH ZIONISM, 1942-POST-WAR

As the Second World War continued and Hitler appeared unstoppable, Dorothy Thompson and the world began to hear scattered news coming from Europe of a so-called “Final Solution” to the Jewish question. As the Jewish catastrophe unfolded, Thompson stood out as an unwavering voice of outrage – she immediately believed the reports of previously unthinkable horrors and worked to make sure others knew about them. Again, she was one of the first journalists to substantiate the shocking reports and discuss the particularity of Jewish annihilation as something more than standard or general wartime suffering. Following her previous pattern, she utilized her network and pleaded for action against the “Final Solution” in a variety of ways. In addition, realizing the dire situation for European Jews and the reality that there was not much that could be done besides win the war and restore democracy, she began to heavily advocate for the Zionist cause. Simultaneously, she looked toward the future, creating peacetime plans that she hoped would restore a democratic Europe.

Reporting the Holocaust

Throughout the war, Dorothy Thompson was one of the few journalists to consistently comprehend and denounce the systematic extermination of Jews. In August 1942, the US State Department received a report sent by Gerhart Riegner, a representative of the World Jewish Congress, that revealed that the Nazis were “implementing a policy to

physically annihilate the Jews of Europe.”¹ Department officials decided not to release this information publicly for fear of putting pressure on the American people to act, the very outcome Thompson had been encouraging since the early 1930s. Following the initial public rumors, many American Jewish publications reported on the annihilation, but “the plea for non-Jewish support went largely unanswered.”² Historians have pointed out that in the midst of the horror of World War II the specificity of the extermination of Jews was misunderstood as a part of general wartime suffering.³ In light of this, Dorothy Thompson once again stands out from the crowd as someone who was willing to believe in and act on the limited knowledge of the Holocaust.

Significantly, Thompson was chosen as one of the important people contacted by Jan Karski, a courier for the Polish underground who carried reports of the Holocaust to the Allies. Karski carried with him a message from the Socialist Bund and the Zionist underground which articulated the following: “The massacre of Jews...was not motivated by German military requirements. Hitler and his accomplices decided on a total annihilation of Jews regardless of the outcome of the war. Jews in Poland are helpless. They cannot rely on the Polish Underground or the general population. Some individuals are being saved but only the Allied governments can effectively help.”⁴ Beyond this emergency message, Karski was instructed to share a variety of concrete steps that the Allied governments should take:

¹ “The United States and the Holocaust,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005182>.

² Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 63.

³ See Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

⁴ Harry J Cargas, *Voices from the Holocaust* (Lexington, Ky: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1993), 58.

1. A public announcement that prevention of the physical extermination of the Jews become a part of the overall Allied war strategy, at the same time informing the German nation through radio, air-dropped leaflets, and other means about their government's crimes committed against the Jews.
2. Available data on Jewish ghettos, concentration and extermination camps, names of the German officials directly involved in the crimes, statistics, facts and methods used should be spelled out.
3. Public and formal appeals to the German people to exercise pressure on their government to make it stop the exterminations.
4. Placing the responsibility on the German nation as a whole if they fail to respond and if the extermination continues.
5. Public and formal announcement that, in view of the unprecedented Nazi crimes against the Jews and in hope that those crimes would stop, the allied governments were to take unprecedented steps.⁵

Before Karski was sent to meet with high-level figures to transmit this information, the Polish Underground wanted him to be a first-hand witness to the "Final Solution" so that the story would be more convincing. To do this, Karski was smuggled into and out of the Warsaw ghetto twice and Belzec death camp once in October 1942.⁶ Following this daring mission, he began the vital journey to spread the terrible news and his first destination was London.

Between November 1942 and June 1943, Jan Karski was "in personal contact with a great many important persons" with the job of convincing them to believe what was happening to Europe's Jews.⁷ He was instructed with the following: "tell them what you have seen, what you have been through in Poland."⁸ Some of the people he met with included four members of the British War Cabinet, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, American Ambassador to the Polish government-in-exile Anthony Biddle, Secretary of

⁵ Ibid, 59.

⁶ Ibid, 61.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jan Karski, *Story of a Secret State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1944), 386.

State Cordell Hull, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, President Roosevelt and a few special non-governmental persons, such as Rabbi Stephen Wise and Dorothy Thompson.⁹ While most of the people Karski met with believed what he reported, the governmental figures remained tight lipped on the situation and believed that the only thing to possibly do was win the war.¹⁰

The non-governmental figures had more freedom to speak out and act on the information that Karski provided. However, most journalists did not report on the Holocaust with much certainty. Again, Thompson was an outlier in the way that she responded. After the war, Karski recalled how Thompson was one of the rare columnists who was not afraid to believe and write articles, based on what he and other reports told her, about the special nature of Jewish suffering.¹¹ For example, in an undated set of notes from some point in 1942, Thompson confirms her belief in the “chamber of horrors” created by the Prague Gestapo, which tortured Jews and Czech citizens alike. Her notes contain disturbingly detailed descriptions of how Jews and Czech resisters were being tortured and murdered by the Gestapo at Petshek-palace – she discussed a variety of body parts being repeatedly burned with white hot wires, prisoners being stripped and chased through, “the tunnel,” a line of Gestapo men who beat them until they fainted or died, and a mass incident of gang rape targeting female prisoners. Importantly she notes:

On several previous occasions it has been pointed out that some of the actually established cruelties might be just single cases of willful acts on the part of one or the other degenerate individual. But the latest reports show clearly that is the case

⁹ Ibid and Cargas, *Voices from the Holocaust*, 61.

¹⁰ Cargas, *Voices from the Holocaust*, 63.

¹¹ Jan Karski, “Oral History Interview with Jan Karski - Collections Search - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” accessed June 2, 2020, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506527>.

of the entire system, and that the process of torture is governed by precise regulations which are being obeyed to the letter.¹²

Her informants even told her that within the Gestapo headquarters they had “tried out their deadly gases... for these purposes, separate gas chambers have been constructed there.”¹³

While it is unclear how she received this information and whether there were gas chambers at this Gestapo headquarters, it is notable that Thompson readily believed all of it and recognized that the Nazi torture and murder practices were not singular events or general wartime practices, but an “entire system” devised with “precise regulations” and goals. The vast majority of journalists and government officials were not so quick to recognize these kinds of shocking reports as legitimate.

Because she believed in the reports she was receiving from her wide network of sources that included Karski, Thompson took the suggested action steps that the Underground sent to heart. She began to provide the general public with knowledge of systematic Jewish extermination and she also began a campaign to appeal to the German people and their collective responsibility in hopes of spurring revolt and ending the Nazi government. Thompson’s quick understanding and reaction to news of systematic mass murder is consistent with her earlier reporting on the particularity of the Jewish position in Nazi Germany. And, like with her many efforts for the refugee crisis, Thompson immediately embarked on a mission to intervene in a variety of ways.

For her first initiative, Thompson set out to appeal to ordinary Germans through a Friday CBS radio address as a part of its broadcast to Europe. Every Friday between March

¹² “Prague Gestapo A Chamber of Horrors,” folder Germany 1942-1943 Notes, box 128, DT Papers.

¹³ Ibid.

and September 1942, Thompson graced European listeners with a segment that she called “Listen, Hans.”¹⁴ Clearly this broadcast was happening before official governmental acknowledgement of the Final Solution, but Thompson spoke about reports of Jewish annihilation early and immediately shifted its content to focus on the Holocaust as soon as possible. She was hopeful that this method of communication could sway the minds of those living under Hitler, and as Karski had suggested, it was one important way to hold Germany accountable for the Nazis’ actions and to let them know that the world was watching.

The broadcasts were approved by the US government as they were passed through the Coordinator of Information and then the Office of War Information in order to hit the airwaves. Thompson designed the addresses in a personal manner, speaking to an old friend “Hans” still residing inside the German inferno. In the introduction of her book *Listen Hans* (compiled of radio address transcripts) Thompson stated, “through him, I have sought to re-establish contact with men and women of like mind in an enemy country.”¹⁵ Hans was not a fictional character that Thompson made up to appeal to Germans, she was addressing her actual friend and anti-Nazi resistance leader, Helmuth James von Moltke. While the US government was reluctant to work with the small German resistance, Thompson had this personal connection which she utilized to heed Karski’s advice. As mentioned previously, Thompson had met Moltke through her mentor, Eugenie Schwarzwald, while living in Germany in the 1920s.¹⁶ Thompson was impressed by his “social conscience” and

¹⁴ Dorothy Thompson, *Listen, Hans* (Houghton Mifflin, 1942), VII.

¹⁵ Thompson, *Listen Hans*, VIII.

¹⁶ Balfour, *Helmuth von Moltke*, 25.

their friendship persisted throughout the Nazi rise and the 1930s. Moltke was exceptionally well informed about the political developments in Germany and supplied Thompson with information throughout these years.¹⁷ As a leader in the small German resistance movement against Hitler, “the Kreisau Circle,” he also continuously tried to get the British and the US government to work with him to no avail.¹⁸ In contrast, Thompson was always willing to work with her old friend, but their communication became difficult after the US entered the war. She designed her “Listen Hans” broadcasts with the hope that they would reach him and the other handful of resistance actors in Germany.¹⁹

Thompson maintained that her broadcasts were “compelled by a deep conviction that politics was a prime instrument of war.”²⁰ She intended to reach Germans who weren’t sympathetic to Hitler and implore them to rise up against their own oppression and the unfolding atrocities committed by Nazi leaders. Thompson viewed her broadcasts as a contribution to the war effort and she hoped to reach a wide variety of Germans to inspire them to rebel against Hitler and his murderous system.²¹ One broadcast makes this vision extremely evident with Thompson saying that “Only a revolution for freedom in Germany can prevent German extinction.”²² In a poignant broadcast from August 14, 1942 it is clear that Thompson attempted to make “Hans” feel guilty for the atrocities of his nation and ignite resistance:

¹⁷ Ger van Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler: Count von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle*. Translated by Peter Ludlow. (London, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co, 1971), 21 and 186.

¹⁸ Freya von Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau and the German Resistance (Erinnerungen an Kreisau)* (Lincoln, Neb: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), X.

¹⁹ Van Roon, *German Resistance to Hitler*, 187.

²⁰ Thompson, *Listen, Hans*, IX.

²¹ Howes, *World War II: Biographies* (Detroit: U.X.L., 1999), 269.

²² Thompson, *Listen, Hans*, 246.

Under *your orders*, populations are slaughtered from Oslo to Rostov. Under *your orders* innocent hostages are shot. Under *your orders*, trainloads of helpless Jews are transported to the Polish swamps, there to perish... You can only be saved by yourself, and in the company with all the selves that feel as you do. What you say... to each other, you must say aloud, and to the world.²³

Unfortunately, it seems that Moltke never heard these broadcasts,²⁴ but Thompson's sentiment behind them shows her persistent worry about what was happening to Jews and her willingness to try any number of approaches to inspire a revolt against the Nazi system. Separate from Thompson's appeals, Moltke and his circle of resistance agents decided that Hitler needed to be killed after realizing the extent of the systematic murder that was happening. In 1943 a plan evolved to plant two explosives, however, they only managed to plant one and Hitler escaped with minor injuries. Those responsible were arrested and executed, including Helmuth James von Moltke.²⁵

By Fall 1942, Thompson had another strategy to raise awareness about the "Final Solution" and this time it was domestically focused. She wanted the general American public to hear consistent news about the mass murder in hopes that enough outrage could spur some kind of governmental action. Directly after the extermination reports were leaked in December 1942, Thompson created a strategy to raise awareness about the Jewish horror and try to act against it. First, she immediately made a broadcast over CBS radio which contained a dramatic running account of the growing Nazi atrocities.²⁶ With this broadcast and subsequent reporting she confirmed the horrible details that many other journalists dismissed as unbelievable, exaggerated, or merely part of general wartime

²³ Ibid, 272.

²⁴ Balfour, *Helmuth von Moltke*, 28 and Thompson, *Kassandra Spricht*, 25.

²⁵ Moltke, *Memories of Kreisau*, XI.

²⁶ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 292.

suffering.²⁷ On the December 20 broadcast Thompson told the American people the following news:

This terror is directed against the peoples of the occupied countries, and, as in the case of every way of terror, it begins using the Jews as its test and training ground. It is very difficult for us to believe the things that have been reported. Theoretically we have foreseen what would happen, but in reality, we have steeled our minds against so-called atrocity stories. Nevertheless, the facts are true, and the general facts have even been confirmed by the Nazi government. On June 12th, Dr. Goebbels announced that, quote, the bombing of German cities would be answered with the extermination of the Jewish race in all Europe and perhaps even beyond Europe. Unquote. That extermination is now proceeding. This week, I had luncheon with the chief of the Polish government in exile, General Sikorsky, who is temporarily in this country. He confirmed, through the reports of the Polish intelligence service, what had previously been reported by Jewish committees. Members of the Jewish race, men, women and children, have been taken from all the occupied countries to the East, especially to Poland, and there are being slaughtered. Some are being starved to death; others machine gunned to death in trenches; others gassed and killed by lethal injections.²⁸

From this broadcast it is evident that Thompson tried to correct the inconsistent record on the “Final Solution” by reporting on the distinct and targeted extermination of Jews. She insisted that the atrocities being reported were true and implored Americans not to merely dismiss them as rumors or exaggerations. Notably, Thompson’s broadcasts regularly reached over 10 million listeners, nearly fifteen percent of the American population.

In December, as part of this series of moves designed to inspire resistance in Germany and stir public attention in America, Thompson won approval from the World Jewish Congress for her idea to publish a “Christmas Declaration” from Americans of German descent.²⁹ The ad, signed by 50 prominent Americans, ran in the *New York Times* and nine other prominent newspapers stated the following:

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Radio address, 20 December 1942, Blue Network 1942 folder, box 113, DT Papers.

²⁹ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 64.

We Americans of German descent raise our voices in denunciation of the Hitler policy of cold-blooded extermination of the Jews of Europe and against the barbarities committed by the Nazis against all other innocent peoples under their sway. These horrors ... are, in particular, a challenge to those who, like ourselves are descendants of the Germany that once stood in the foremost ranks of civilization ... We call on [Germans] to overthrow a regime which is in the infamy of German history... We, Americans of German descent, utterly repudiate every thought and deed of Hitler and his Nazis. Other Americans must know where we, and you, stand.³⁰

Some of the signatories included baseball player Babe Ruth, journalist William Shirer, former assistant secretary to the Treasury Peter Grimm, and editor of *The Nation* Freda Kirchwey. The declaration was widely reported and also circulated on the radio. It was broadcast across the country, to the US armed forces overseas, and to Axis Europe. According to Historian David Wyman, Thompson's "Christmas Declaration," though a seemingly minor act, "marked the high point for months to come of American non-Jewish action to help Europe's Jews."³¹ Further revealing her sustained efforts for European Jews, Thompson also tried to organize a delegation of German Americans to meet with Roosevelt and Churchill. She hoped that this could implore the two world leaders to make a direct appeal for resistance to the "Final Solution" among the German people. Unfortunately, this initiative did not receive enough public support and failed to materialize.³²

After news of the "Final Solution" broke, Thompson also remained intent on aiding individual situations. A note from Thompson to Vice President Henry Wallace states,

Do you think that through your contacts with the Swiss minister you could get any news of Helen and Albert Sachs. Russian born, Jewish, holding Nansen passports.... Who were deported by the germans in July 1942 to a camp in Auschwitz Poland near Krakau. Mrs. Sachs is the dear sister of one of my most

³⁰ "Display Ad 17 -- Christmas Declaration men and women of German ancestry!" *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Dec 28, 1942.

³¹ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 64.

³² *Ibid.*

intimate friends the great woman pianist Ania Dorfman. Please if there is anything possible to be done in the way of getting information from and to them or ascertaining whether they are alive or dead, help me.³³

Continued correspondence such as this reveals that Thompson was still actively sought out for assistance. This note also shows that she continued to reach out to her plethora of government contacts for information and demanded attention for the Jewish catastrophe.

Though it is difficult to measure the reach of Thompson's campaigns such as the "Listen Hans" broadcast and the Christmas Declaration, or whether she had an effect on any German or Americans minds, her courage to speak about what others were not believing is inescapable. As her activism shows, Thompson tirelessly continued to put pressure on sympathetic Germans as well as the American government to take action against the "Final Solution." Perhaps the only notable achievement on the American end was the creation of the War Refugee Board in 1944. The WRB was limited in what it could attempt. The Board worked to find emergency havens where European Jews could be temporarily interned. Thompson had a hand in championing these "free ports," again arguing that the rescue missions had to operate outside the normal restrictive immigration system.³⁴ Ultimately, the government only established one such haven in Oswego, New York, saving 1,000 lives.³⁵

³³ Note from Dorothy Thompson to Henry Wallace, undated, undated 4 folder, box 42, DT Papers.

³⁴ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 263.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 265.

Zionism and Peacetime Planning

During World War II, Thompson reported and politically organized for the American war effort. At the same time that she was interested in getting American opinion behind the war and against the extermination of European Jews, she worked toward building an international democratic future. Her vision for this involved two strategies: one that advocated for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and another that advocated for the restoration of a democratic Germany. Thompson realized that given the horrific situation that European Jews found themselves in and the continual apathetic nature of democratic nations, they would need a place to call their own in a post-war world. In regard to Germany, Thompson believed that a systematic approach was needed for re-education to create a democratic society that should be much stronger than its weak Weimar predecessor.

Dorothy Thompson was a longtime Zionist before the news of Jewish annihilation. According to her close friend Meyer Weisgal, the Director of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in New York, since her first trip to Europe, when she randomly found herself on a boat with Jews attending the Zionist World Congress, she had been a supporter of those who desired to build a home in Palestine.³⁶ Weisgal first met Thompson at a dinner she hosted for Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann in 1940. Weisgal described Thompson as thinking that Chaim Weizmann “was God” and truly believing in his vision for a Jewish future.³⁷ Especially during the war years “Dorothy Thompson was perhaps the leading non-Jewish protagonist of Zionism and the Jewish homeland, the voice of Christendom ringing

³⁶ Weisgal, *So Far...*, 66.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 179.

across the world in turmoil. Every Jewish organization wanted her.”³⁸ Indeed, Thompson was regularly featured by Jewish news agencies such as the *B’nai B’rith Messenger*. They valued her opinion that Zionism was a necessity for the Jewish people. In the November 28, 1941 issue they described Thompson’s importance to the cause: “Miss Thompson has the gift of summarizing an issue at its roots. Because her column is read by millions and her views sway vast numbers, her conception of the role of Palestine in world Jewish life is both vital and timely.”³⁹ In addition to reporting about the Holocaust and Thompson’s news campaigns against it, she also devoted a majority of her time between 1942 and 1945 speaking to Jewish and Zionist audiences about a Jewish future in Palestine.

In a speech titled “Future of the Jews” given at the 1943 National Convention for Palestine, Thompson continued to rail against Nazi atrocities and speak about what the future of the Jewish community should look like. She told her audience,

The mass slaughter of the Jews in the past few years has exterminated Jews of every Nazi-held country, poor and rich, German and Pole, Zionist and assimilationist... The terrible thing about the promise of Hitler to annihilate the Jews is that he has kept this one more successfully than any other of his promises.⁴⁰

Thompson was conscious of the fact that most Americans still did not fully comprehend the reports of targeted extermination, yet she personally believed as late as 1943, that Americans could take action against the genocide. She noted,

At last the extent of the horror that has been visited upon the Jews has begun to penetrate the imagination of the free world. The process of humiliation and destruction has been going on for ten years, but the reaction has, until now, been

³⁸ Ibid, 197.

³⁹ Dorothy Thompson, “The Jews Need Normality,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, November 28, 1941, Page: 1.

⁴⁰ Dorothy Thompson, “The Future of the Jews; an Address Delivered at the 1943 National Conference for Palestine,” 1943 [Hereafter Thompson, “The Future of the Jews”].

negative. First there was indifference. Then there was compassion. Perhaps now there will be action -- as there needs to be.⁴¹

Thompson revealed to the audience her disappointment in America's lack of a humanitarian response in the past few years, hinting at why she chose to become increasingly personally and politically involved. She pointed out that "when the need for remedial action seemed so urgent, the democracies have seemed paralyzed and unable to mobilize the enormous resources which they possess."⁴² She also made specific reference to the failure of the Evian Conference, declaring that it illustrated the ultimate form of indifference:

Too long the refugee problem has been largely regarded as one of international charity. It must be regarded now, and in the coming years, as a problem of international politics... No democratic country can wash its hands of this problem of the doomed Jews if it wishes to retain its own soul... It is perfectly true that the problem was created by Hitler and not by the democracies. The burden is not of our making, but nevertheless it is impossible for us not to accept the burden put upon us... With these ideas are integrated the fundamental concepts of civilization, the thesis of the Four Freedoms ... We must recapture the ground which our own indifference has lost.⁴³

Because Thompson was speaking to an audience of American Jews, she also took an initiative to recommend that they fight for their European brothers, especially in light of overwhelming American gentile apathy. She told them,

If you believe in your own people, you must save them ... I have heard Jews say, 'Why should a Jew interest me more than a Pole. They, too, are suffering.' ... Every American is fighting for the Poles. Every American is fighting for the restoration of the Polish state... The Jewish people are not so fortunate... in stark reality, the future of the Jews as individuals and as a people depends on you. It depends upon the Jews of America.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Thompson, "The Future of the Jews."

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

This argument about fighting for nation-states was consistent with her international political initiative to spread democracy and her hope for a restoration and renewal of a democratic western world. Thompson declared that the future of the Jews must “be *normalized*... In [the] family of nations the Jews must have their place. Room must be made for them.”⁴⁵ She felt similarly to other advocates for refugees who she had repeatedly worked with, such as James McDonald, who anticipated that after the war Jewish survivors would likely continue to have a difficult time trying to come to other countries, including the US.⁴⁶ Thompson was also looking ahead to a Jewish state in Palestine for those who needed it and she was hoping that American Jews would understand that politically, that was something the American government could fight for.

Through the duration of the war, Thompson used reports from the Underground to continue to inform the public about the extent of mass murder, telling an audience at the 26th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration at Carnegie Hall the following gruesome picture:

The Polish Jews, interned in ghettos and camps, are being executed to make room for other European Jews, who then, in their turn, will be executed. The camps are in Eastern Poland. As the Russians advance all male Jews will certainly be liquidated, lest liberated by the Russians they join them as guerillas. For even in their ghettos -- in Warsaw, Bialystok, and elsewhere --- they have not been hounded into a firing squad without a fight. With such weapons as they could smuggle in, through the Polish underground, and with their bare hands, and with fire, they have made the S.S. men pay with many wounds and many deaths for their extermination. They have not died like bugs and roaches. They have died like men. But their resistance has been only for the record of Jewish heroism. They have died to prove that Jews are not worms. But they have died, just the same....It is reckoned that of the 3,500,000 Jews originally in Poland, not a quarter of a million still live. Those

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “The Refugee Problem: A Survey and a Program,” National Conference for Palestine 1944, (Box 11, Folder 18), James G. McDonald papers, USHMM.

who do are protected by non-Jewish members of the underground, or live, like cave men, in the Polish forests. They live to tell a story, not to save a people.⁴⁷

With this she called on the Western world, especially American Jews, to think about what the future of survivors would look like. She insisted that the problems European Jewry faced would endure past the length of the war:

The words I must say are bitter, but they are true. There are many who think that European Jewry will be safe everywhere after Hitler's defeat. Many count confidently on returning even to Germany. They are living in illusion. For all the devilish schemes of the devilish followers of Hitler, his campaign against the Jews has been most successful....The Hitler campaign against the Jews enters the realm of the subconscious. It makes the person inoculated, unsusceptible of reasoning. It is enormously augmented by a suppressed sense of guilt. Do you think that men love those whom they have wronged? Never. The sense of their own guilt would be unbearable unless they could rationalize some justification for their behavior. It will take generations to wipe out of the subconscious mind of Europeans, the sense of witchcraft, the dark fears, that have been implanted there. Even our victory will not make Europe a pleasant place for the Jews. Even outside Europe, yes, even in America, the subtle poison, dropped by day, in tiny doses, has begun to take hold.⁴⁸

Thompson implored her listeners to understand that the only place that Jews had a chance to be welcomed with opened arms was in Palestine. She argued that of course they had a right to be there, since she thought that the earth belonged to those who give back to it. In her opinion the Jews were set up to do this in Palestine – they would be great colonizers who could “aid the land and grow civilizations... he is not the exploiter; he is the enricher.”⁴⁹ Thompson pressed her point by comparing these Jewish settlers to the original colonists in the United States: “But it was their hands which built America’s most comely

⁴⁷ Dorothy Thompson, *To Whom Does the Earth Belong?* (London: Jewish Agency for Palestine, 1944), 2-3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-4 ; Interestingly Thompson’s wartime insights are some of the same conclusions that historians have recently come to about treatment of Jews in the post-war period. See Jan Tomasz Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz ; an Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007) and Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁴⁹ Thompson, *To Whom Does the Earth Belong?*, 5.

villages and cities....which created life, order, civilization, law, education, and aspiration in the howling wilderness. And because of their pioneering work, millions of men, not of their religious belief and not of their race, have enjoyed the fruits of America.”⁵⁰ While Thompson would change her opinion about Zionism in the post-war period, she was a vocal, proud, and insistent Zionist before and during the war. Given what she knew European Jews were going through and the democratic world’s relative apathy, it makes sense why she envisioned Palestine as a viable, necessary, and democratic option, which could further spread American ideals in a post-war world – regardless of whether or not those societies wanted to embrace them.

Toward the war’s end Thompson also began to advocate for a peace plan that would allow Germany to again join the western democracies. As early as 1943 she was calling for a post-war world where the US and Britain should stick together with the Soviet Union so that they may stand strong against Germany. As she had previously advocated, she also envisioned a world led by US policy and she pushed for the re-education of all Germans to ensure that they conform to American ideals.⁵¹ Further, she feared that a terribly harsh peace would be a repeat of the past mistakes of the Treaty of Versailles – her goal was to avoid a similar outcome.⁵² Thompson worried very much that the US did not give enough thought to the question of how to deal with Germany after they were defeated. For example, during the summer of 1944 she got into a disagreement with the Department of

⁵⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁵¹ How must we deal with Germany after the war to win the peace? (Dorothy Thompson speech 9/30/1943); Series: Audio Recordings of “America’s Town Meeting of the Air” Radio Programs, 1935-1954, New York University Collections, NACP.

⁵² Ibid.

War over its treatment of German prisoners of war. She was furious that it was the army's policy not to allow democratic literature for prisoners and even more appalled that there was not a comprehensive attempt to "indoctrinate German prisoners with democratic ideals."⁵³ She believed that the handling of prisoners revealed a tremendous lack of vision for the post-war world, insisting that they were missing a "valuable opportunity.... to learn how masses of Germans can be divided into reliable and unreliable elements."⁵⁴ The War Department was not pleased with Thompson "accusing them of being slackers" and because of her harsh opinions, they tracked and monitored her writings for a number of months.⁵⁵

It is true that Thompson was quite adamant about popularizing her post-war vision. In May 1944, she was one of the prominent co-founders of the Council for a Democratic Germany. The committee was made up by a majority of German refugees. In its statement of purpose, the council wrote,

We believe that the value of this declaration lies not only in mobilizing anti-Nazis inside Germany, but that it has an important bearing on political developments in this country as well. Without a genuine agreement between the great powers and without creative plans for the reorganization of all Europe, no peace will endure, no matter what steps are taken to destroy Germany's potential power for aggression.⁵⁶

⁵³ "Prisoner of War - Articles by Dorothy Thompson," (Provost Marshal General), Executive Division, Technical Information Officer, Publicity File, 1942-1945, Speeches to Wolf - Dieter Zander, Box no. 26, Record Group 389, NACP.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Dorothy Thompson Folder, (Provost Marshal General), Prisoner of War Operations Division, Operations Branch, Unclassified Decimal File 1942-45, S- Shooting to XYZ, Box no. 1209, Entry 451, Record Group 389, NACP.

⁵⁶ Statement of American Endorsers, May 1944, Free German Committee (New York) folder, box 11, DT Papers.

The council was advocating against both a “soft” peace and a “hard” peace; its ultimate goal was to bring about a democratic Germany after the war, without the same mistakes as last time. However, the council still advocated appropriate punishment of war criminals and an effective denazification strategy.⁵⁷ To Thompson’s disappointment, the Council’s goals were ultimately undermined by the Allied demand for unconditional surrender and the differing opinions of the Western Allies and the Soviet Union.

It is evident that during the war years Thompson’s political initiatives to shift some American sentiment toward intervention were the most successful. Vincent Sheean remarked that the “assistance rendered by Dorothy” to influence American popular opinion about the war was truly “very great,” and Roosevelt and Churchill were both appreciative of this.⁵⁸ However, her reporting on the “Final Solution” and her insistent demands for political action to save Jews as well as her specific restorative vision for a democratic Germany were not as appreciated by officials. Thompson’s relentless fight against the German inferno, through various initiatives, challenges the blanket narrative of American complacency by revealing a prominent voice who was not afraid to shine a light on indifference and motivate at least some Americans to join in her sympathies. As Walter F. Wanger wrote to Thompson in 1944, “You did the nation a great service. This country needs more Dorothy Thompsons.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Clipping from *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2 May 1944, “Reich Emigrees From Council for a Democratic Germany,” Free German Committee (New York) folder, box 11, DT Papers.

⁵⁸ Sheean, *Dorothy and Red*, 154.

⁵⁹ Letter from Walter F. Wanger to Dorothy Thompson, 20 November 1944, War-War folder, incoming correspondence, box 32, DT Papers.

CONCLUSION

In April 1945, following the end of the war, Dorothy Thompson made her first journey back to the country she had intimately loved as a young reporter. On this trip she visited a liberated concentration camp and wrote an article foreshadowing Raul Hilberg's and Hannah Arendt's reflections on the "banality of evil."¹ She observed:

The Germans are in many ways *like us*. That is what is terrifying about the concentration camps, with their millions of victims murdered en masse by the most modern and hygienic methods... gassed to death in ingeniously constructed chambers, disposed of in mass produced crematories... Nothing, to me, in visiting these camps, was so shattering as the sight of the homes of the SS administrators - of the men who, in a modern bureaucratic manner... gave the orders which resulted in tortures, carefully calculated famine and corpses piled like cordwood, when the crematories were too full. Their homes were *civilized*... When civilized man, with his science, his technique, his organization, his power, loses his soul, he becomes the most terrible monster the world has ever seen...²

In this description we can find another one of Thompson's prescient insights. This was an early attempt to explain how the German nation as a whole, including the desk killers, the actual killers, and the bystanders, were normal humans. Thompson believed that the responsibility for what happened to Jews and others during the war extended beyond just the Nazis. She recognized that the silence and inaction of most people, in Europe and beyond, allowed such a murderous system to unfold. In a post-war speech she said the following words:

The crimes against the Jewish people will not have been expunged by the sentencing of Streicher, Rosenberg, Frank and other Nazi Germans directly

¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003) and Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

² "Lessons from Dachau" article, LHM 1944-1946 pub 4 folder, box 80, DT Papers.

involved in their extermination. Those crimes can only be expunged and justice satisfied, when to agitate for the persecution of any race or nation of mankind is universally recognized as a crime against humanity, and when those Jews who have remained alive after an era of torture which has lasted more than twice as long as the European war, are given the opportunity to live out their lives in freedom and from want and fear.³

Not only did Thompson see murderers for who they were – normal human beings who were capable of evil that many thought was “beyond belief,” she also equated the general lack of sympathy for the Jewish plight, which emanated from individuals and governments alike, with a failure of humanity and democratic responsibility that needed to be recognized and rectified in the post-war world that valued human rights.

Due to her political involvement and action throughout the entire span of the Third Reich, Thompson was asked to serve as an American advisor on the situation of post-war Germany. She was personally asked to “spare a little time to educate State Department Personnel abroad.”⁴ Thompson made several visits to Germany in this period, mostly working with State Department officials and conducting interviews with the German population. However, she divulged to Helen Reid that the whole situation depressed her. Feeling as if “no one knew what to believe in or what they wanted” in the post-war situation, she wrote: “At the end of it all I had the feeling that the whole world was imprisoned in Germany – the Americans, Russians, French and British – and, of course, the Germans – and no one had the faintest notion of how to get out.”⁵ Thompson did not

³ Dorothy Thompson, *Let the Promise Be Fulfilled* (New York: The American Christian Palestine Committee, 1946), 1-2.

⁴ Letter from Donald R. Heath to Dorothy Thompson, 24 June 1945, Incoming Correspondence, box 29, United States Political Advisor for Germany folder, DT Papers.

⁵ Letter to Dorothy Thompson from Helen Reid, July 14, 1949, From the Library of Congress, *The Reid Family papers*, Box D92, folder Thompson, Dorothy, 1949.

feel satisfied with the work they were doing because she was disappointed that the post-war situation became a rivalry between the US and Soviet Union, but her continued advisory role shows how ultimately her personal knowledge and public activism did not go completely unnoticed during the war years – even if her initiatives were not always implemented at higher governmental levels.

After the end of the war, Thompson also continued her personal humanitarian mission to aid refugees – now labelled displaced persons. She joined forces with many Zionist groups to advocate for an “unrestricted Jewish emigration to Palestine”⁶ and she joined the American branch of the Refugee Defense Committee and became its chairperson in 1946. The committee was “dedicated to the protection and resettlement of displaced persons.”⁷ The Refugee Defense Committee also had a British branch and Thompson worked closely with this counterpart to facilitate the emigration of displaced persons. She continued to utilize her network to help various refugee cases. However, given that by this time she had a relatively tense relationship with the War Department and some State Department officials from her adamant campaigns before and during the war, she was smart enough to use other connections to get in contact with the necessary people. For example, she wrote to Helen Reid asking for her to connect Sir Clifford Heathcote-Smith, a member of the England Refugee Defense Committee, with General Marshall and Cordell Hull. She wrote that she was trying to talk to Hull herself “but my connections with him are pretty tenuous and perhaps you could help [Heathcote-Smith] to see General

⁶ Picture of Thompson with Zionists at Meeting at Battalion Hall, Forest Hills, Long Island, NY, October 30, 1945, folder Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1945, box 73, DT Papers.

⁷ Letter from Lord Beveridge to Dorothy Thompson, Bel-Ble folder, incoming correspondence, box 4, DT Papers.

Marshall.”⁸ Thompson’s networking proved helpful and Sir Clifford Heathcote-Smith was connected with Marshall and Hull.⁹ From this exchange it is evident that Thompson continued to use her network to great lengths in order to help refugees in any way that she could and her relentless advocacy was certainly well known, and perhaps off-putting, to officials who had dealt with her prodding for years.

On an individual level too refugees and displaced persons continued to contact Thompson for assistance. One example is a letter dated May 16, 1946 from Hans Zeisel. Zeisel wrote on behalf of a Julia Zupnik. He said, “through some miracle Mrs. Zupnik survived, first Austria and then Poland: I have a letter from her as bright and cheerful as ever before.”¹⁰ Zeisel explained that Mrs. Zupnik wanted to immigrate to America and had friends who would support her financially. He continued the letter saying, “the problem is to reach the ear of the U.S. consul in Poland a more urgent way than by a mere application.”¹¹ He requested a letter from Thompson for the US Consul in Krakow in hopes that she could persuade the officials to allow a visa for Mrs. Zupnik. Thompson replied and agreed to send affidavits through the State Department’s diplomatic mail.¹² There are numerous other examples of post-war assistance in Thompson’s papers, showing that her personal journey to aid refugees did not cease.

Her continued efforts to help individuals through a confusing immigration process also point to the ongoing refugee crisis in the post-war period. The Allies procrastinated

⁸ Letter to Helen Reid from Dorothy Thompson, April 14, 1949, From the Library of Congress, *The Reid Family papers*, Box D92, folder Thompson, Dorothy, 1949.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Letter from Hans Zeisel to Dorothy Thompson, 16 May 1946, Z folder, box 34, DT Papers.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Letter from Dorothy Thompson to Hans Zeisel, 23 July 1946, Z folder, box 34, DT Papers.

with a solution to the hundreds of thousands displaced persons across Europe. Jewish refugees especially had a difficult time emigrating from Europe with most having to remain in displaced persons camps for months, even years, or reluctantly returning to their countries of origin where many faced continued antisemitism.¹³ As before, the US immigration laws did not create special quotas for Jewish survivors, forcing them to contend with the many others who wanted to leave their war experience and Europe behind. The Displaced Persons Act in 1948 authorized 200,000 DPs to enter the US, but the law was unfavorable to Jewish DPs until it was amended in 1950. Overall about 80,000 Jewish DPs immigrated to the US, significantly fewer than the 136,000 that went to Israel in the aftermath of the war.

In the post-war period Dorothy Thompson continued to care for all the same causes she had championed for more than fifteen years. However, it was during this period that her stardom began to fade and a persistent, and rather preposterous, narrative about her being an antisemite emerged.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this narrative has overshadowed Thompson's pre-1946/7 campaigns on behalf of Jews and this has led to an unbalanced understanding of what she believed in and what she fought for the vast majority of her life and career. Given that this thesis has been an in depth examination of her overwhelming advocacy for the Jewish community, including her own personal devotion to Zionism, especially in light of the Holocaust, it is a bit ironic that Thompson became branded as an

¹³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Displaced Persons" Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/displaced-persons>. Accessed on April 15, 2020.

¹⁴ Kurth, *American Cassandra*; Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*. For a source that takes this narrative as face value, see Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writings, Rights, and Refugees* (Oxford, United Kingdom; New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2018).

antisemite and a staunch opponent of Israel just a few years after the war. This shift began when Thompson's attention increasingly turned to the Middle East, one of the new hotspots of international politics.

The switch in her opinion started off innocently enough, merely agreeing with Chaim Weizmann's evaluation of some terrorist problems that were happening in the new state of Israel.

In May 1945, immediately upon the surrender of the German army, Thompson travelled to the Middle East and visited Palestine for the first time. Telling of her devotion to the Jewish community, the trip was for her to be honored by Jewish leaders in recognition of her support of Zionism and her advocacy for Jews throughout the 1930s and the war.¹⁵ Revealing her stardom among this group, almost every average person she met knew her name and what she had done.¹⁶ Her trip was planned by Weizmann, who considered her to be "a great friend of [the Jews]."¹⁷ During the trip she went on a lengthy tour, especially of various kibbutzim and she was impressed with how much had been done "with the land and the people" in a relatively short time period of time.¹⁸ While visiting she excitedly asked about life on a kibbutz, including questions about the position of the women, how membership and the distribution of the work were organized, cultural activities, and education. Before leaving each venue she offered "deeply-felt sympathy for the suffering Jewish people."¹⁹

¹⁵ Ashley, *American Newspapers Journalists*, 349.

¹⁶ "Dorothy Thompson Pays Us A Visit," *The Sentinel*, Thursday, June 28, 1945; Page: 7.

¹⁷ Number: 2017.3.1, RG-68.196M, Letter from Chaim Weizmann to Moshe Shertok, Esq., 19 April 1945, The Zionist Organization/The Jewish Agency for Palestine/Israel-Central Office London (Z4) USHMM.

¹⁸ "The New Palestine: Columnist in Whirlwind Tour of Eretz" 9/28/45, folder Articles about Dorothy Thompson 1945, box 73, DT Papers.

¹⁹ "Dorothy Thompson Pays Us A Visit," *The Sentinel*, Thursday, June 28, 1945; Page: 7.

While Thompson was impressed with what was happening there, as a reporter and someone who cared about the rights of all, she followed in Weizmann's footsteps, voicing concern about how there were extremist groups of Jewish terrorists in Palestine stirring up trouble with the Arab population.²⁰ In July 1946 she wrote a column called "The Palestine Tragedy" in which she emphasized the zealotry of certain Zionists and their acts of terrorism. This new opinion, while in line with Weizmann's public concerns about the same problem, were perceived as highly unpopular by her editor, publisher, and her readers, who believed that given all the Jews had just gone through, the criticism was unnecessary.²¹ In particular, the Zionist Organization of America "violently resented" her utterances against Jewish terrorism and began a forceful campaign against her.²² It produced hundreds and thousands of telegrams, letters, and postcards that poured into the *New York Post* offices protesting everything that Thompson wrote.²³ Meyer Weisgal surmised that this campaign was carefully orchestrated as the editor of *The Post* was good friends with people in Etzel (Irgun), the terrorist group Thompson had criticized.²⁴ This campaign caused her column to be dropped by the *New York Post* in 1947 and from there, her journalism career began to quickly fade. In addition to this, some Jewish newspapers that had regularly featured Thompson began to run frequent anti-Thompson articles. They accused her of reversing her standpoint on all points she fought for throughout the 1930s, arguing that now she was advancing a "new kind of Protocols of Zion."²⁵

²⁰ Weisgal, *So Far...*, 197.

²¹ Ashley, *American Newspapers Journalists*, 349.

²² Weisgal, *So Far...*, 197.

²³ *Ibid*, 198.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ "The Fallen Star," *Bnai Brith Messenger*, Friday, November 25, 1949; Page: 5.

Weisgal's analysis of the situation contends that ironically, now it was precisely because Thompson was not Jewish that such a negative reaction to her criticism occurred. In his autobiography he points out that Weizmann, whose views Thompson was merely agreeing with, never faced such backlash; "Dorothy mistook her cue...Dorothy was not Jewish, she could not speak with that all-commanding authority...She was bound to be misunderstood."²⁶ Weisgal's commentary hints at a deeper explanation for why segments of the Jewish community turned their back on Thompson after she voiced criticism rather than respect all of their post-war wishes. Before and during the war, Thompson had been the perfect ally, applying her liberal and protestant based beliefs in a universalist democratic future to the specific issue of advocating for Jewish acceptance – an outcome that she saw as tarnished by longstanding antisemitism and the new force of Nazism. In this period, the majority of American Jews especially wanted to be accepted and assimilated into this universalized vision. After the tragedy and horror of the Holocaust, in the post-war world many Jews began to assert the particularism of their communal identity as a people who recently experienced devastating oppression.²⁷ Combined with the worries about Jewish safety and survival that the Nazi atrocities had created, this identity assertion resulted in a strengthened desire for the elevation of particular Jewish problems and Jewish nationalism. In some Zionist minds, the fact that Thompson was a non-Jewish ally who went against, even if only slightly, the newly invigorated wishes of the Zionist community, appeared as a major betrayal, leading her to be shunned as an outcast. In the post-war world,

²⁶ Ibid, 197.

²⁷ For more on this phenomenon see Deborah Lipstadt, *Holocaust: An American Understanding* (New Brunswick, New Jersey ; London: Rutgers University Press, 2016) and Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*.

Thompson, a non-Jew who had a slightly different vision than some post-war Jewish leaders, was easily viewed as paternalistic and problematic by the minority group that had just experienced the most intense form of oppression and now wanted to determine, and secure, their future.

Thompson was extremely saddened and upset about these post-war events. After she was let go from *The Post* she wrote to Arthur Lourie of the Zionist Emergency Council: “I refuse to become an anti-Semite by designation.”²⁸ Unfortunately, that was more or less what happened and it shaped the narrative around Thompson’s career and personality for years to come, significantly obscuring all the devoted work she had done to support and defend Jews when many others looked the other way. The anti-Thompson campaign did not cease when she left *The Post*, rather, it intensified to outrageous levels. For example, she was accused of lining her pockets with fees she received from Zionist and Jewish organizations that she had spoken for before and during the war. According to Weisgal, of all the negative press she received, this accusation hurt her most, and she insisted that “all monies accruing from public lectures went into a trust fund, which [Weisgal] controlled, for the German-Jewish refugees who came into her orbit.”²⁹ From reading through Thompson’s papers, it seems as though this claim is true – nearly all her finances went directly into a trust fund overseen by Weisgal and from there they travelled to the pockets of individual refugees or refugee organizations.

This erasure of Thompson’s private and public efforts during the 1930s was certainly detrimental to her legacy and she felt very personally attacked by some members

²⁸ Ibid, 198.

²⁹ Ibid.

of the community she had so fiercely supported; even a number of close friends began to believe the lies that were told.³⁰ Thompson later divulged to Weisgal that this abandonment pushed her toward supporting Palestinian Arabs who openly welcomed such a prolific columnist and activist to fight for their cause. While some old friends were exiting, new friends who happened to be anti-Zionist and instead supported a joint Jewish-Arab state, such as the members of the American Council of Judaism, grew close to Thompson.³¹ Of this switch Weisgal writes that “all [his] stupid Zionist friends, who had maneuvered Dorothy into this position [with their aggressive lies], now came forward enmasse chanting: ‘We told you so.’”³²

With her career as a journalist waning, Thompson also became involved with a new organization called the American Friends of the Middle East, further solidifying her as an anti-Zionist and even an antisemite in some minds.³³ However, the stated point of this organization was to facilitate intellectual and spiritual exchange between the Middle East and the West by bringing speakers back and forth, because in Thompson’s post-war mind, “the mandate period...extended Western influence but also left a heritage of antipathy behind it. Moreover, the forming and proclamation of the State of Israel in Palestine towards the end of the mandate period, ostensibly supported by the United States of America, has complicated the situation considerably... For these reasons, and many others... highly explosive tensions' exist today between the Middle East and the West,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ashley, *American Newspapers Journalists*, 349.

which the enemies of the West are quick to exploit."³⁴ Thompson always maintained that she was far from an antisemite and wanted people to understand that after further investigation into Middle Eastern affairs she merely concluded that in her perspective Zionism was a recipe for "endless war." Although their post-war views on Zionism differed, Thompson remained friends with Weisgal during these years, and according to him, by the start of the 1950s she was privately regretting her public support of staunch anti-Zionist groups.³⁵

In 1958 she officially retired from the public eye with her last column appearing on August 22 in the *Lady's Home Journal*. After this, she spent most of her time at Twin Farms in Vermont or visiting her son and his family who lived in Europe.³⁶ She also embarked on writing her autobiography, a project she was excited about, but of which she would never write more than an opening chapter concerning her upbringing. Weisgal writes about one time in the late 1950s when he visited Thompson at Twin Farms, they discussed her views on the Middle East late into the night. Weisgal writes that he told Thompson the following:

I think I can understand what happened, and I believe there is still a great role you still have to play. You are a friend of the Arabs; you are certainly not an enemy of the Jew, though you still bear a deep grudge against some Zionists; for that matter, so do I. You have looked at each side in turn, and you know the best possibilities of each. You can become a catalyst for a peaceful solution of the problem. You are full of energy and vitality, and if you throw yourself into this task you could make a decisive contribution to the cause of both peoples.³⁷

³⁴ "Dotty' Thompson Forms New Anti-Israel Group," *The Sentinel*, Thursday, June 28, 1951; Page: 3.

³⁵ Weisgal, *So Far...*, 199.

³⁶ Ashley, *American Newspapers Journalists*, 349.

³⁷ Weisgal, *So Far...*, 199.

Supposedly after that, Thompson was silent for a long time – a notably rare occurrence. At last she replied to Weisgal by saying that his words had touched her very deeply and she promised to think about them. Her response was as follows:

I have felt very strange in this company; I know I have let my frustrations get the better of me. Ever since my youth my association has been with Jews – with Zionist Jews. Weizmann was always my hero; and now I have to straighten myself out. What you have told me will not be forgotten. I think I can make a contribution, but I don't want to do it precipitately and impulsively. I am going to Spain to meet my son. When we come back let's meet and map out a rational program that will be helpful to the Jews and Arabs and the entire Middle East.³⁸

Thompson did travel to Spain, a voyage that also included a brief trip to Israel, where this time she was coldly received. Perhaps this trip was helping inform her for the Middle East plan she desired to create with Weisgal, but unfortunately there is no such documentation of her thoughts during this journey.³⁹ Afterward she went to Portugal and in an unfortunate twist of fate, Dorothy Thompson never had the chance to further engage in opinion-making or publicly alter her position on the Middle East. She passed away unexpectedly at the age of 67 from a heart attack that hit suddenly while she was in Lisbon on January 30, 1961. Because of this unexpected death, Thompson was never able to put her own perspective about her life down on paper – leaving it up to others to sift through her life and determine her legacy.

Dorothy Thompson's Legacy

Dorothy Thompson spent her final years in an unpleasant atmosphere of “scorn, derision, and personal vilification” that superseded her honorable individual and public

³⁸ Ibid, 199-200.

³⁹ Ibid, 200.

campaigns of urgent action against Nazism and for Jews during the 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁰ Because of this, her intense battle on behalf of democracy and the unparalleled work she did for those who were not as powerful as she has not yet been fully appreciated. As Meyer Weisgal pointed out, Thompson was a victim of her own greatness – because of her “impetuosity, drive, and obsessiveness” she was always carried to extremes, which was either helpful or harmful depending on the desired outcome of a situation.⁴¹ While these fiery qualities allowed her to achieve the magnitude of success that she did, endeared her to many, and gave her the ability to push forward when she was repeatedly turned down, blocked, or disappointed, they also inspired a network of those who disliked her and made her an easy target for controversy that misconstrued her life’s work.

In addition to the post-war contention that surrounded Thompson and the Middle East, her historical legacy also became depoliticized and sanitized as evidenced by her Twin Farms home being turned into a luxury resort and spa operation that acknowledges her and Sinclair Lewis’ story only on a superficial level.⁴² While the resort does advertise her “political and literary” guests and her “legendary parties,” it shies away from describing the home as a welcoming shelter and new beginning for a long list of Jewish refugees who fled the terror of Nazi Germany or how Thompson was a foremost American advocate of Jewish acceptance, instigator of aid and rescue operations, and a vocal leader for war intervention. From the resort’s limited description, one could easily walk away with the impression that Thompson was nothing more than a fabulous housewife and engaging

⁴⁰ Ibid, 193.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Twin Farms Website: <https://www.twinfarms.com/about/>, Accessed July 15, 2020.

socialite, not a courageous woman activist who had been the first journalist kicked out of Germany by Hitler himself and who then led what can be considered the American resistance against Nazism. While the phenomenon of simplifying or watering-down a historical actor's story is a frequent occurrence in popular memory, it does indicate that on a personal and public history level, Dorothy Thompson's extraordinary life deserves a deeper appreciation and a more complex remembrance.

In the wider field of history Dorothy Thompson's fierce mission and full legacy is only now being acknowledged. As a prominent figure who starkly diverged from the original historiographic narrative of American apathy, many eminent historians who have examined the US response to Nazism and the Holocaust did not explore Thompson's significant insights and her various humanitarian and political contributions – in most works she appears as a mere footnote, if at all. Though Thompson's unique story highlights elements of the American bystander narrative such as a slow and somewhat reluctant governmental response and ill-informed and inconsistent press coverage, it also pushes the field to expand beyond this narrative, asking us to consider why and how individual actors from across the world, as well as networks of people, responded to Nazism and Jewish persecution. There were clearly various levels of response ranging from ideological, organizational, and practical on-the-ground action carried out by individuals, and Dorothy Thompson's story indicates that they are all worthy of examination and that, often, these reactions and initiatives were interwoven. Her story also suggests that when it came to resistance efforts against Nazism and Jewish persecution in the American context, individual and non-political actions often found more success than government initiatives.

Dorothy Thompson's activism invites a broader investigation of American reaction to Nazism and the Holocaust, reminding us that there was resistance – and compliance – in all societal settings and that events in Nazi Germany did not unfold in a vacuum, but rather were connected to and sometimes informed by the outside world. Dorothy Thompson is a nexus from which we can view how this history unfolded beyond geographical barriers. Most importantly, as a person whose life straddled Germany and America, she was able to transmit “European concerns” into the United States and because of her personal connections that reached far beyond the US, she provided an escape route for people looking for a way out of Hitler's Europe. These important connections are sometimes overlooked when one examines this history solely by specific geography or from a structural level. Here they prove to be a vital path of historical investigation of Nazism and the Holocaust. Although Thompson's story offers this *transnational* perspective, she also serves as a visible and powerful example of *specific* and *personal* American outrage and rescue that touched individual lives, leading us to the conclusion that perhaps not all Americans were, or had to be, ill-informed and disengaged onlookers if they subscribed to a more cosmopolitan mindset or if they merely paid attention.

Beyond this, Thompson's varied campaigns – avid reporting, public speaking, influencing literature and film, collaborating on theatrical productions, whispering in the president's ear, sponsoring individual immigrants, protesting isolationist movements, pushing major rescue operations and founding democratic organizations – reveal the impact of a single person, using her own abilities, beliefs, and connections to alter seemingly static systems that can seem unmovable. She reminds us that sometimes previously hidden, or underappreciated, actors in history can affect more change than the

commonly known people, groups, or policies we immediately think of. Because Thompson was a major figure and her full impact has still not been well understood, her story asks us to consider the many other behind-the-scenes people who influenced the general American response in the interwar period, especially the intentions and actions of those who were more easily silenced than she. At the very least, she tells us that there is still much to be uncovered and explored about the government's, media's, and general public's response to Nazism and the Holocaust.

In order to uncover Thompson's mission and role in 1930s and 1940s America (and beyond), this research has reexamined material, as well as sources that have not been extensively used and a substantial quantity that have not been included in previous works. For example, this thesis has examined how Thompson's wide-reaching network informed her worldview and how she utilized it to facilitate a variety of anti-Nazi activities within the United States and beyond – for which she gained significant attention from admirers and enemies. This research has also uncovered and substantiated the previously un-sourced claim that Thompson was the key player behind the idea for and design of the Evian Conference, the world's only organized (yet unsuccessful) attempt at helping European Jews. It has also shown how the structures created for the Evian Conference, namely the PACOPR, were later used to facilitate an actual American resistance operation – the Emergency Rescue Committee – which Thompson also had a major part in. Further, this thesis has highlighted how because of Thompson's identity as a non-Jewish American, she was an important ally for the Jewish community throughout the duration of this period – possessing the ability to push for action more than many American Jews felt comfortable with in an atmosphere of isolationism and antisemitism, speaking to the importance of

strong allies for minority groups, especially in times of intense persecution. Finally, this research has also shown that, ironically, this non-Jewish identity also caused Thompson to fall out of favor after the war, speaking to the growing force of Zionism in post-war American political and cultural Jewish life.

In general, this thesis has argued that the uniqueness of Thompson's reporting on Nazism, her steadily raised voice against Jewish persecution, and her relentless humanitarian and political initiatives make her a vital, yet underappreciated, player in American public life and a necessary figure in the wider historical narrative about American apathy and action. This investigation has sought to expand and contextualize the story of this period of Thompson's life, producing an in-depth analysis of the avenues she took and networks she utilized in this dimension of her activism. Rather than write an all-inclusive biography of her life or mention her in passing as a quick counterpoint to general American complacency, this research has synthesized both approaches to produce a concise, but thorough, examination of her relentless – and multilayered – mission. Therefore, this thesis is a fairly narrow and deep investigation into one important woman's dealings with the general threat of Nazism, and specifically, the threat it posed to European Jews. Not only has this research revealed Thompson's consistent concern with making the American public understand these issues, but it has also looked at the variety of ways one individual refused to remain a bystander – the lengths she went to advocate against Nazism and for Jews, as well as the systemic obstacles that were in her way.

By choosing to engage in unwavering political and humanitarian action, Dorothy Thompson was a courageous human reflection of Lady Liberty. Thompson's distinctive reporting on the threat of Nazism, and her quick call for action to assist the Jews of Europe,

as well as for Americans to stand up and defend democratic principles, were virtually unparalleled in the United States. Thompson took her personal knowledge and urgent concern for the situation in Europe and intended to transmit that same knowledge and urgent concern to the American public. She not only saw the threat of Nazism to Jews and the democratic world, but also asked the American people to consider these threats within their own country, where she functioned as a bridge from Europe, providing reliable information, facilitating dialogue, influencing important figures behind the scenes, and founding public initiatives to combat the dangers that she sensed. Along with her constant pleas or “shouts” as some have said, Thompson served as a personal example to take action. This thesis has shown Thompson’s multilayered appeals for public action and her equally important personal action to combat a universal human crisis that was not an imperative issue in American politics and press, until it had to be. While her influence was great, her prescient insights, moral intentions, creative avenues of activism and her persistent nature are her true legacy for which she should be remembered.

Though Dorothy Thompson is a courageous historical figure worthy of praise for consistently choosing to use her voice and take action, it must be noted that her relentless mission and her obsessive personality were often off-putting for her contemporaries. It has been asserted by previous biographers that Thompson’s highly opinionated and haughty demeanor tended to work against her. Thompson’s “domineering” presence and her ability to be swayed by emotion may have prevented many Americans from heeding her call to action.⁴³ Yet, it is precisely these traits that seem to have personally sustained Thompson,

⁴³ Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson*, 372.

as a powerful woman, in her lengthy mission of standing up against Nazism and acting on the behalf of persecuted persons. This type of fiery personality was key in a rather apathetic atmosphere where solutions only happened if they were forced and often, those solutions needed to be frequently re-invented.

Sadly Dorothy Thompson could not find enough favor to affect public policy to the degree that she intended, and as quickly as she thought was necessary, but she was a prominent woman who illuminated dark realities and felt a personal and persistent obligation to awaken the conscience of the American people at all levels. Thompson may not have been able to eradicate apathy, antisemitism, or anti-war attitudes, but she was a leading figure who made the American people aware of a foreign crisis as well as an internal moral crisis within their own country. These threats were too easily ignored in the years prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor and late confirmation of the Final Solution. Thompson's legacy and her wider mission is summed up best in a January 1939 letter to her:

I speak for the multitudes of my oppressed brethren throughout the world in lauding your tireless efforts on their behalf. In championing the cause of those who dare not speak for themselves you serve humanity at its lowest ebb. Like the Statue of Liberty, you inspire them with a new faith, and hope that freedom and justice is not yet dead.⁴⁴

In the context of her time, Dorothy Thompson was truly a "social rebel,"⁴⁵ leading the way by lighting a torch for causes that were not recognized, understood, or acted on by others, until it was far too late.

⁴⁴ Letter from Frederick Margareten, 13 January 1939, Scrapbook 32: Letterbook 24 Jan 1939 - Dorothy Thompson honorary dinner, Oversized Material, DT Papers.

⁴⁵ Letter from H. R. Knickerbocker to Dorothy Thompson, 27 May 1928, Knickerbocker, H. R. Apr 1928-38 Jun 1930 folder, incoming correspondence, box 16, DT Papers.

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