

The 1943 Jewish March on Washington, through the Eyes of Its Critics

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Three days before Yom Kippur in 1943, more than four hundred Orthodox rabbis marched to the White House to plead with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to rescue European Jews from the Nazis. For a cause which on its merits would seem unobjectionable, the march encountered a surprising amount of opposition. The president refused the rabbis' request to hand him a petition. FDR's Jewish advisers denounced the protesters. A prominent Jewish member of Congress urged them to cancel the march. Some Jewish leaders publicly condemned them. Why did the march provoke such criticism? Why did the organizers insist on going ahead with it, nonetheless?

In a generation that has seen hundreds of thousands of American Jews protest in Washington for Soviet Jewry (1987) and Israel (2002), a march by hundreds of Orthodox rabbis may not seem impressive.ⁱ But it was the only such protest in the nation's capital during the Holocaust. The very fact that it was so unusual contributed to the wave of alarm that it triggered in official Washington.

President Roosevelt's decision to snub the rabbis was based on cold political logic. He opposed using even minimal resources to aid Europe's Jews, and he did not want to elevate the rabbis' pleas for US intervention. A meeting with the president—even just “a few minutes of his most precious time,” as the rabbis put it—would legitimize their cause, bring them added attention, and increase pressure on the White House to respond to their plea for rescue. In the end, FDR avoided seeing the marchers by slipping out of the White House through a rear exit.

The Jewish opposition to the march, however, went beyond mere political calculations. A prominent Jewish member of Congress, Representative Sol Bloom (D-New York), urged the rabbis to call off the march on the

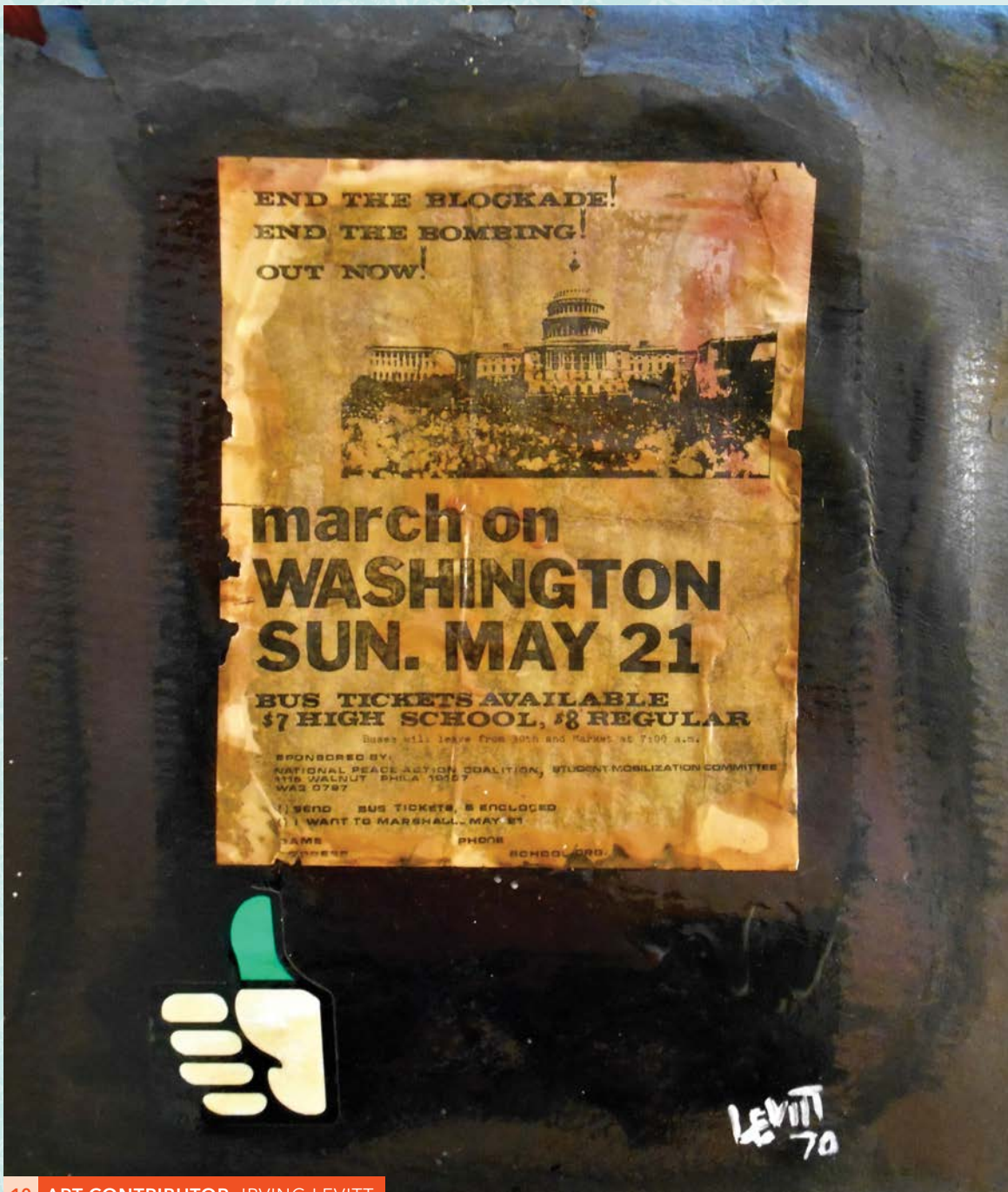
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grounds that “it would be very undignified for a group of such un-American looking people to appear in Washington.” Bloom was referring to their long black coats and beards; the marchers were, overwhelmingly, European-born and Yiddish-speaking—today they would be characterized as Haredi. Bloom later urged the Justice Department to deport one of the organizers of the march (who was not a US citizen), on the grounds that his activities could “provoke sufficient antagonism among the citizens of the United States to cause anti-Semitic pogroms.”ⁱⁱ

In a similar vein, Samuel Rosenman, President Roosevelt's senior adviser and speechwriter, told the president that the rabbis were “not representative of the most thoughtful elements in Jewry”; that “the leading Jews of his acquaintance opposed this march”; and that he “had tried—admittedly without success—to keep the horde from storming Washington.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The era's most prominent American Jewish leader, Rabbi Stephen Wise, criticized the march in somewhat similar terms. Wise, who headed the American Jewish Congress, the World Jewish Congress, and the American Zionist movement, wrote that “the orthodox rabbinical parade [*sic*]” was a “painful and even lamentable exhibition.” He derided the organizers as “stuntists” and accused them of offending “the dignity of [the Jewish] people.”^{iv}

Wise was a staunch supporter of President Roosevelt and his administration and did his best to counter or suppress Jewish criticism of the president. It was not that Wise was indifferent to the suffering of European Jews, but he was convinced—or convinced himself—that FDR could be relied upon to do what was possible to aid them.^v



10 ART CONTRIBUTOR: IRVING LEVITT

March on Washington, 1970. Collage with cardboard, paper, acrylic, lacquer, and adhesive sticker. 16 x 20 in. © 1970 Irving Levitt. Courtesy of the Levitt Family Collection.

The way in which Wise chose to frame his opposition to the marchers is telling. Instead of assessing the merits of Roosevelt’s refugee policy and the marchers’ demands, Wise focused on the protesters being Orthodox and, in his view, undignified. Wise, a Reform rabbi, was given to occasionally making unsympathetic remarks concerning Orthodox Jewry; but his hostility toward the marchers had more to do with their appearance than theological differences. Old-world garb and accents were, in his view, undignified.

Faced with such strong opposition, why did the protesters go forward? Precisely because their view of the place of Jews in American society was so different from that of their critics.

One of the groups that organized the rabbis’ march was led by foreign citizens. The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, commonly known as the Bergson Group, was headed by militant Zionist activists who had come to the United States temporarily,

from Palestine and Europe. The co-organizer of the march was the Va'ad ha-Hazalah, an Orthodox rescue advocacy committee representing rabbis who resisted acculturation and insulated themselves from American society and culture. The Bergsonites and the rabbis, each for their own reasons, were unconcerned about being accepted by the non-Jewish public.

Jeffrey S. Gurock has posited that American Jewish leaders' responses to political and social controversies often can be understood according to where the individuals may be found along what he calls the Americanization continuum. Those furthest along on the continuum are the most sensitive to the attitudes of the general public because their overriding goal is to be accepted as Americans; those who resist Americanization tend to be the least interested in such considerations.^{vi}

This helps explain why the foreign nationals of the Bergson Group and the Haredi rabbis of the Va'ad ha-Hazalah were indifferent to the complaints of their opponents. It also helps clarify why the Yiddish-language press—by its very nature, a bastion of resistance to full Americanization—not only accorded the march extensive and sympathetic coverage, but criticized President Roosevelt in language that was unheard of in the English-language Jewish press.

The *Forverts*, for example, headlined its report, "Rabbis Conduct Impressive Demonstration in Washington," and one of its columnists reported that "in open comment [in the Jewish community] it is voiced that Roosevelt has betrayed the Jews." A columnist for the *Morgen Zhurnal* complained of the "cold reception tendered the rabbis." A columnist for *Der Tog* called the protest "a grand and glorious demonstration." In the *Yiddish Kempfer*, a columnist asked, "Would a similar delegation of Catholic priests have been thus treated? Would our President, had they come to intervene for their doomed co-religionists, sent them to his secretary? No, this would not have happened."^{vii}

Despite the fears of their opponents, the rabbis' march did not cause an antisemitic backlash. Ironically, the president's snub ended up giving the protest the front-page news coverage that the president and his advisers had hoped to avoid. As a result, the march helped galvanize public and congressional sympathy for rescue.

That boosted the subsequent efforts on Capitol Hill by Jewish activists, which, combined with behind-the-scenes pressure from the Treasury Department, eventually compelled President Roosevelt to establish the War Refugee Board. Despite receiving meager government funding and little cooperation from the president or other government agencies, the board played a major role in the rescue of more than 200,000 refugees during the final fifteen months of the war.

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i According to most estimates, "more than 200,000" attended the Soviet Jewry rally in Washington, DC on December 6, 1987 ("Colorful, Dedicated Thousands Travel for Soviet Jewry Rally," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, December 7, 1987). "More than 100,000" attended the April 16, 2002, rally for Israel ("Speakers Stick to Consensus Theme at National Solidarity Rally for Israel," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, April 16, 2002).

ii Bloom's remark was quoted by one of the organizers of the march, Eri Jabotinsky, in a private letter to supporters, October 12, 1943, Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv. Bloom's request is cited in Alden to Ladd, March 24, 1945, Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, made available to the author under the Freedom of Information Act.

iii William D. Hassett, *Off the Record with F.D.R. 1942–1945* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 209.

iv "Propaganda by Stunts," *Opinion*, November 1943, 4.

v In the first draft of his autobiography, Wise alluded to his (belated) disappointment at Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust, but in the end, he could not bring himself to include those lines in the published version. See Rafael Medoff, *The Jews Should Keep Quiet: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and the Holocaust* (Lincoln, NE: Jewish Publication Society of America / University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 305–6.

vi Jeffrey S. Gurock, "The Americanization Continuum and Jewish Responses to Christian Influences on the Lower East Side, 1900–1910," in *Christian Missionaries and Jewish Apostates* ed. Todd Endelman (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987), 255–71.

vii M. J. Nirenberger in *Morgen Zhurnal*, October 8, 1943; S. Dingol in *Der Tog*, October 16, 1943; *Forverts* front-page headline, October 7, 1943; Zivyyon in *Forverts*, October 16, 1943; Shlomo Grodzensky in *Yiddisher Kempfer*, October 15, 1943.