

May 1, 2011

James G. McDonald, FDR, and the Holocaust, 1943-1944

I. Background: James McDonald and European Jewry

James G. McDonald (1886-1964), scholar, journalist, and diplomat, was a prominent figure in efforts to aid European Jewish refugees throughout the Nazi era. He served as the League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Coming from Germany from 1933 to 1935, was a member of the U.S. delegation to the Evian refugee conference in July 1938, and chaired the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees from 1938 to 1945.

McDonald's efforts consistently met with frustration. He resigned in protest from the League of Nations refugees commission in 1935 over the failure of the international community to pay anything but "lip service" to the plight of Jews fleeing Hitler.¹ The Evian conference of 1938 achieved next to nothing, because of the refusal of the United States and other countries to open their doors to more refugees. The President's Advisory Committee was a toothless agency, whose advice was almost always ignored by the president.

McDonald's papers, housed at Columbia University, offer a rich source of documents chronicling his role in the refugee struggle. A major new source of information about McDonald's life and work surfaced in 2003, when his daughter, Barbara McDonald Stewart, donated her father's diaries to the United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum. They became the basis for a projected three-volume series covering McDonald's years of public service, the first two volumes of which appeared in 2007 and 2009. Prof. Richard Breitman, editor of the museum's scholarly journal, and Severin Hochberg, of the museum staff, are editing the volumes along with Ms. Stewart. (The museum is not, however, permitting outside scholars to examine the diaries until all three volumes are published.)

The second volume, *Refugees and Rescue*, covering the years 1935-1945, attracted significant international attention because of the editors' claim that the diaries present "fundamentally new information about [President Roosevelt's] views and policies before and during the Holocaust," namely that FDR privately undertook "a series of initiatives" to rescue European Jewry.² Although the diaries include a few private remarks by McDonald expressing disappointment in the Roosevelt administration's refugee policy, the entries and the editors' comments give the overall impression that McDonald was supportive of FDR. The book contains no suggestion that McDonald ever publicly criticized the president on refugee policy, either during the refugee crisis of the 1930s or the genocide period of the 1940s.

But new evidence has emerged that suggests a rather different picture.

II. Another Side of James McDonald

Documents located by the Wyman Institute in the McDonald Papers at Columbia reveal a different side of James McDonald. They show that on at least eight occasions in 1943 and 1944, McDonald, in writings and addresses that are described in detail below, strongly criticized the Roosevelt administration's positions with regard to the plight of European Jewry, both privately and publicly. His statements are all the more

¹ Rosenberg to Waldman, June 26, 1935, RG 23, file 1/33, American Jewish Archives, cited in Monty Noam Penkower, "Honorable Failures Against Nazi Germany: McDonald's Letter of Resignation and the Petition in its Support," *Modern Judaism* 30 (October 2010), pp.247-298. Also see Haim Genizi, "James G. McDonald: High Commissioner for Refugees, 1933-1935," *Wiener Library Bulletin* 30 (New Series nos. 43/44), 40-52.

² Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart, and Severin Hochberg, eds., *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald* (Bloomington, IN: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 4, 329, 335.

remarkable in view of the fact that McDonald made them at a time when he still chaired the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees.

During the 1930s, both during his term as High Commissioner and afterwards, McDonald had never publicly criticized the Roosevelt administration's refugee policy. Even in private, he was quite circumspect in his comments in this regard, as *Refugees and Rescue* shows. Beginning in early 1943, however, there was a sudden and obvious change in the tone of McDonald's statements. This change followed very soon after the Allies' public confirmation, in December 1942, that the Nazis were carrying out the systematic mass murder of European Jewry. It seems likely that the Allies' verification of the shift from discrimination and sporadic violence to organized annihilation played a role in the evolution of McDonald's thinking on the subject.

Although one or more of the editors of *Refugees and Rescue* evidently examined the McDonald Papers at some point, almost none of the documents cited in this study were quoted in that book.

Allied plan for a lengthy discussion of the problem, McDonald declared that "the time for lengthy discussion of this problem is long past." Instead of talk, the Allies needed to take "immediate emergency measures to save the Jewish remnants of Europe." McDonald specifically dismissed the various proposals for settling refugees in Africa, South America, and elsewhere, with which the Roosevelt administration had toyed for some years. He called those plans "palliatives that hardly stand critical examination. The obvious first step lies close at hand. It is offered by Palestine."

McDonald pointedly challenged the claim, by the American and British governments, that opening Palestine's doors to Jewish refugee immigration would anger the Arab world. He "discounted the fears as to the possible political effect which an enlarged Jewish immigration to Palestine may have on the Arab population." Citing the spread of pro-Axis sentiment in the Arab world, McDonald said that Arabs who supported the Nazis "cannot now be affected by any form of appeasement or bribery."

III. James McDonald and the Bermuda Refugee Conference

Under pressure from refugee advocates, liberal journalists, and some members of Congress, the Roosevelt administration in early March 1943 revealed that it planned to sponsor an Anglo-American conference, in Ottawa (later switched to Bermuda), to discuss the refugee problem.³ James McDonald was not impressed. In an address shortly after the announcement of this

³ David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp.106-107.

McDonald did not mince words in framing the moral question at stake. The Allies' response to the mass murder of the Jews, he said, constituted "a first test of mankind's will to save and reestablish decency on earth."⁴

McDonald reiterated, and expanded upon, these themes in an essay for the American Zionist magazine *New Palestine* on March 19, 1943. He again insisted the time for discussions was "long past" and criticized as "palliatives" the possible resettlement sites in Africa and South America. Palestine, he wrote, was the only real solution for the refugee problem—and if not Palestine, "the alternative is death by many horrible means."

McDonald blasted the Allies' "old-time diplomacy with its...niggling approach...dilatatory commissions, White Papers, endless discussions and committees and unwillingness to face the peremptory need for bold planning and prompt action." He asserted that the Allies had "a primary task" and a "responsibility" to save the Jews. McDonald's conclusion: "The claims of Jewish refugees to haven ought to transcend all narrowly political considerations. For these Jewish victims of Nazi barbarism are a first test of mankind's will to save and reestablish decency on earth."⁵

Roosevelt established the War Refugee Board, a new government agency to facilitate the rescue of Jews from the Nazis. FDR's act mollified some of his critics, but not James McDonald. He evidently realized that the underfunded and understaffed War Refugee Board would achieve little without a basic change of attitude in the White House. In a number of public and private letters and speeches in 1944, McDonald was increasingly blunt in his criticism of the Roosevelt administration's response to the Nazi mass murder.

On April 19, 1944, McDonald sent a copy of his 1935 resignation letter to John Pehle, executive director of the War Refugee Board. Marking several pages about the inadequacy of international efforts for the refugees in the 1930s, McDonald told Pehle that this problem was "the heart of the matter as I saw it then and, I might add, as I still see it."⁶

The following month, McDonald, who had complained about the international community's "lip service" in the 1930s, invoked that phrase once again. Addressing a B'nai B'rith - District 1 conference in Buffalo, NY on May 22, 1944,

IV. James McDonald and Roosevelt's Failure to Rescue

In January 1944, under strong pressure from congress, refugee advocates, and Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., President

⁴ The exact date and venue are not indicated on the text of the address, which may be found in the Herbert Hoover Papers, File: Post-Presidential Individual - Ben-Horin, Eliahu, at the Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, IA. There is no mention of this address in *Refugees and Rescue*.

⁵ James G. McDonald, "The Time for Discussion is Past," *New Palestine*, March 19, 1943, pp.5-7. A brief paraphrase of two of the points in the article (but no actual quotations) is included in *Refugees and Rescue*. For some reason, despite McDonald's very strong emphasis on Palestine, the paraphrase instead emphasizes McDonald's support for temporary havens in areas other than Palestine. The editors' comments on the article do not explain that McDonald's position differed significantly from that of the Roosevelt administration despite the fact that he was still chairman of the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees. Curiously, the footnote by Breitman, Hochberg, and Stewart does not cite the actual *New Palestine* article, but instead refers to a mention of it that appeared in a published letter by Chaim Weizmann. (*Refugees and Rescue*, p.308, n.48.)

⁶ McDonald to Pehle, April 19, 1944, Box 33, File P68, James G. McDonald Papers, Columbia University. There is no mention of McDonald's letter to Pehle in *Refugees and Rescue*.

McDonald charged that the United States "paid only lip service" to the plight of Hitler's Jewish victims before the war and "declined to make these crimes a major issue." He said "timidity and fear of not being re-elected" were to blame for indifference to the plight of Jews in Nazi Germany.

McDonald said that a firm response by the U.S., Great Britain, and France to Hitler's anti-Jewish actions in the 1930s might even have headed off World War II. "This war could have been prevented if Western powers had been willing to act concertedly at the time of early abuses of Jews and other groups by the Hitler regime," he said. "Our sons are paying the price on battlefields tonight."

He said that "diplomats do not seem to have learned from past mistakes" and "today again are acting as if refugee problems were relatively minor matters."⁷

On November 19, 1944, McDonald addressed a national conference of the United Palestine Appeal, in Chicago. He described the Allies' response to the Holocaust as "pitifully insufficient" and pointed to "the sorry contrast between the noble sentiments so generously expressed by statesmen and the grossly inadequate actions of most governments and intergovernmental agencies." (p.1) He protested the Allies' "hesitancy, procrastination, half-heartedness or negativism" (p.1), their "calamitous blindness" (p. 1) and "indifference." (p.7) He asserted that they "acted timidly or failed to act at all." (p.2) Again and again, he hammered away at "the shortsightedness of the great powers and their unwillingness to act" (p.17)

Additional highlights of the Chicago speech:
— "When dealing with refugees, almost invariably governments have taken the short view of national self-interest, have been blind to real national self-interest, and have ignored the interests of mankind." (p.1)

— "[N]o effective international measures were taken then [in 1933] or later to curb or even to limit the Nazi program of creating refugees." (p.4)

— "Adolph Hitler, unimpeded by any effective international action, was probably encouraged by the nations' manifest unwillingness to concern themselves with the source of refugees." (p.7)

— "[The Allies' response is] a record of utter inadequacy. It is a record of hopes frustrated and of promises unfulfilled. It is a record of millions of refugees sacrificed because most government leaders would not recognize in time the realities of the international situation and would not act with sufficient vigor to prevent the slaughter or exile of these helpless victims of Nazi persecution." (p.12)
⁸

On November 30, 1944, McDonald sent Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter a critical analysis of the work of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, an ineffective body that had been created at Evian. In his cover letter, McDonald asserted: "My central thesis—unfortunately sustained to the hilt by the record—is that the governments and the intergovernmental organizations have almost never faced the realities of the tragedy of the refugees but that instead they have been guilty of face-saving maneuvers while millions of innocent men and women have been needlessly sacrificed."⁹

⁷ "United States, Britain Have Paid Only Lip Service to Refugees, McDonald Says," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin*, May 23, 1944, p.4; "Scores Diplomats' Stand on Refugees," *Independent Jewish Press Service*, May 22, 1944, p.10; "Chronicle of Events," *Congress Weekly* 11 (May 26, 1944) p. 2; "Refugee Problem Cannot be Dodged, Asserts M'Donald," *Buffalo Evening News*, May 22, 1944, p.16; "War Is Blamed On Unconcern In Race Abuse," *Buffalo Courier Express*, May 22, 1944, p. 9. There is no mention of McDonald's Buffalo speech in *Refugees and Rescue*.

⁸ The text of the address, 19 pages in length, may be found in Box 23, Folder M27, James G. McDonald Papers, Columbia University. Just four paragraphs from the speech—a section that is far from the most critical of the Allies—appear in *Refugees and Rescue*. (See pp. 311-312)

⁹ McDonald to Frankfurter, November 30, 1944, Box 2, Folder 58, James G. McDonald Papers, Columbia University. There is no mention of McDonald's letter to Frankfurter in *Refugees and Rescue*.

V. James McDonald's Challenge to FDR on Palestine

McDonald's attachment to Palestine was intertwined with his concern for the plight of the Jews in Europe. He repeatedly and passionately called for the opening of Palestine to Jewish refugees, in contradistinction to the British closure of Palestine and the Roosevelt administration's tacit support of that closure during the war.

On May 1, 1943, McDonald issued a radio appeal on behalf of the United Jewish Appeal, in Boston. Titled "The Role of Palestine in the Solution of the Refugee Problem," it reiterated some of the points in his earlier Palestine statements, but also added new criticism of the Roosevelt administration. "Clearly the welfare of the Jews who survive the Nazi massacres is a primary responsibility of the United Nations [the Allies]," he asserted. Palestine should be opened to the Jews, and "the alternative [to Palestine] is death." The Roosevelt administration has "the right and the duty to remind the British Government of our country's legal right to be concerned at any White Paper violation of the spirit of the Mandate." McDonald specifically called on President Roosevelt to "remind Prime Minister Churchill that the latter when in the Opposition made a historic protest against the present White Paper...President Roosevelt will, I hope, tell his friend the British Prime Minister that in this matter we expect the British Government to follow the wise and straightforward counsel of Mr. Churchill."¹⁰

During the 1940s, McDonald worked with Prof. Isaac B. Berkson of Dropsie College on a book-length manuscript which they tentatively titled *Palestine in the Middle East*. It was completed, but never published.

In describing the Roosevelt administration's wartime Palestine policy, McDonald and Berkson were measured but clearly critical. Congress in the 1940s was pro-Zionist, they wrote; the State

Department was anti-Zionist; and as for President Roosevelt, "in the end he learned toward the State Department's view." (p.64) Regarding America's right to intervene in the Palestine problem, the State Department took a "narrow interpretation," and "President Roosevelt confirmed this view." (p.66) "The 1939 White Paper"—which closed Palestine to all but a handful of Jewish immigrants—"did not evoke any official reaction on the part of our State Department or on the part of the President." (p. 66) President Roosevelt's opposition was what blocked Congressional pro-Zionist resolutions twice in 1944. (p.67) As for FDR's infamous meeting with Saudi Arabian leader Ibn Saud in early 1945, "what was said apart from the exchange or courtesies, is not known, but...it was not 'good for the Jews'..." (p.68) Yes, the president expressed sympathy for Zionism on occasion, but those expressions did not come "from a conviction about the Jewish national home" but rather "resulted from the pressure put upon him." (pp.68-69)¹¹

VI. Conclusion

During the 1930s, James McDonald refrained from publicly criticizing the Roosevelt administration's refugee policy, although he had ample reason to speak out. McDonald watched with anguish as hundreds of thousands of desperate European Jews were denied haven in the United States, even though America's immigration quotas were far from filled, because the administration actively sought to discourage refugees from coming. McDonald's decision to hold his tongue no doubt reflected his fervent hope that Roosevelt would yet take action to rescue the Jews.

After the rumors of genocide were confirmed in late 1942, however, McDonald could no longer hold back. Undoubtedly it was personally difficult for McDonald to publicly challenge the policies of a president whom he so strongly supported on

¹⁰ The text of "The Role of Palestine in the Solution of the Refugee Problem" may be found in Box 22, Folder MS20, James G. McDonald Papers, Columbia University. There is no mention of McDonald's radio broadcast in *Refugees and Rescue*.

¹¹ The manuscript may be found in Box 23, Folder MS30, James G. McDonald Papers, Columbia University. There is no mention of McDonald's unpublished manuscript in *Refugees and Rescue*.

other issues—and whose President's Advisory Council on Political Refugees McDonald still chaired. But it was a decision based on extensive first-hand knowledge. McDonald was uniquely positioned to observe the Roosevelt administration's response to the Holocaust. Throughout the Nazi era, 1933-1945, he met frequently with U.S. government officials, including State Department officials who implemented refugee policy; individuals who had the president's ear, including the First Lady and senior White House advisers; members of Congress; Jewish leaders and other refugee advocates; and, on occasion, the president himself. McDonald's emergence as an outspoken public critic of FDR's refugee policies was the result of what he saw and heard in the uppermost echelons of Roosevelt's administration.

The evidence of James McDonald's statements in 1943-1944 necessitates a revision of the image of McDonald that was presented in *Refugees and Rescue*, and in the publicity surrounding it, during 2009-2010. Because of who he was, because of what he saw, and because of the strong language he chose, James McDonald must be regarded as a significant public opponent of the Roosevelt administration's response to the Holocaust.