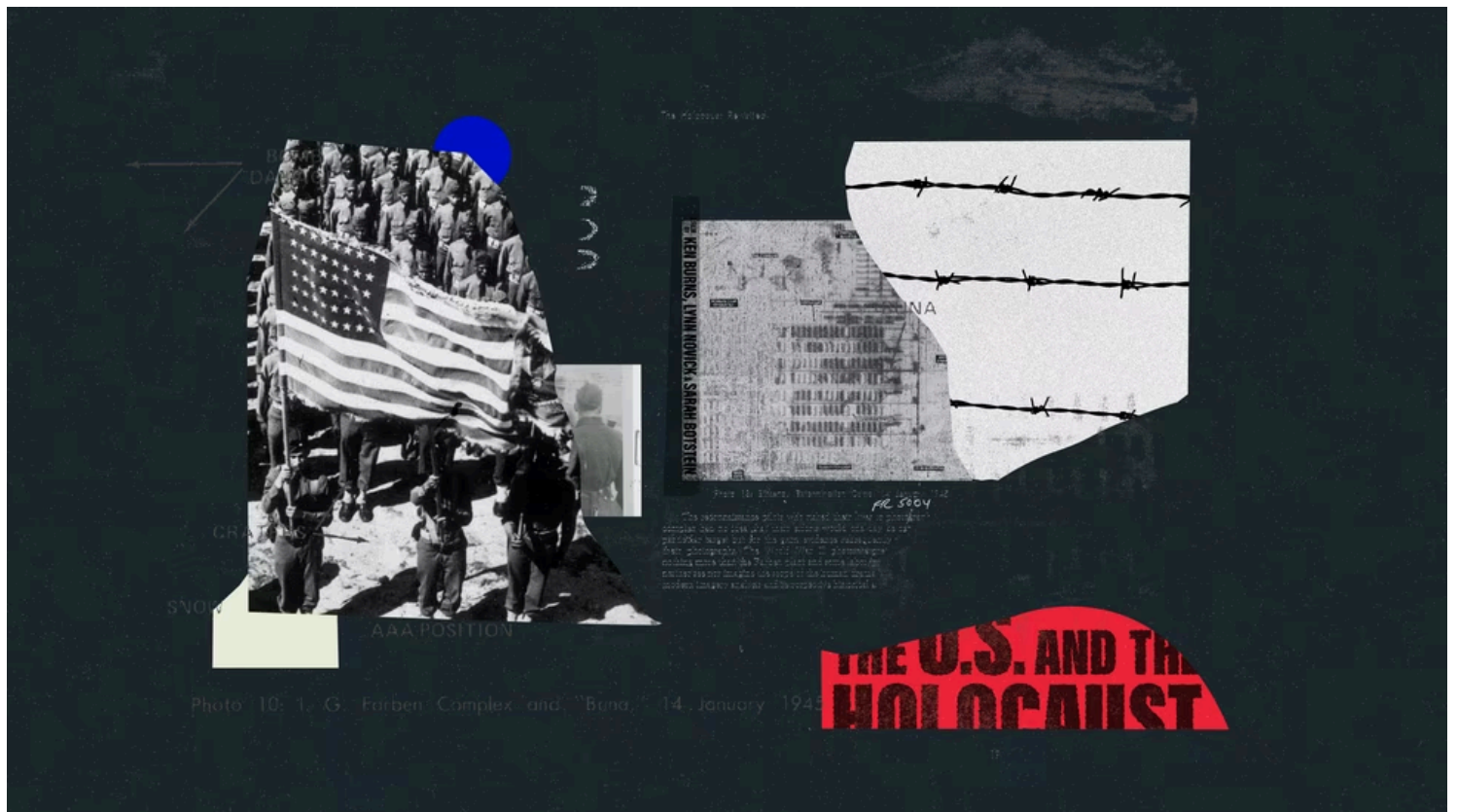


FILM

Why Democracies Are So Slow to Respond to Evil

Ken Burns's docuseries *The U.S. and the Holocaust* confronts a topic that many Americans of every political stripe prefer to avoid: responsibility.

By Dara Horn



Getty; National Archives and Records Administration; Joanne Imperio / The Atlantic

SEPTEMBER 16, 2022

SHARE

SAVE

Many works of history are much less about the past than they are about the present. People contemplate past events to understand current problems, and in today's fractured America, the Civil War would surely be a resonant topic for an eminent documentarian to explore. But Ken Burns has been there and done that. Instead, in our bifurcated country, where the past is relitigated daily in state legislatures and school-board meetings, Burns and his longtime co-producers, Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein, will return to PBS this Sunday with a six-hour, three-part miniseries. They're taking on the one history lesson that all but the most repugnant Americans can still agree on: Nazis are bad.

It's rather dismal that this lesson bears repeating, but apparently it does—especially now, when fascist-leaning rhetoric from both everyday losers and world leaders is often treated as just another edgy meme. Burns and his colleagues, however, remind us of the true stakes of that discourse. Their excellent project, which should be required viewing for all Americans, is about not just the Holocaust, but the U.S. and the Holocaust—an apt title for a series that looks squarely at this country's record of apathy at best, and malevolence at worst, toward the victims of genocide. It confronts a topic that many Americans of every political stripe prefer to avoid: responsibility.

The question of American bystanderism during the Holocaust is well-trod territory among historians, dating at least to Arthur Morse's 1968 book, *While Six Million Died*, and likely heartily debated even earlier. What's new in recent years is the death of several baseline public assumptions that once guided postwar American life: that America is invariably a force for good, that anti-Semitism died in the Holocaust, and that democracy always wins. With the erosion of those ideas, *The U.S. and the Holocaust* reveals a dark perspective on democracy's limits—perhaps even darker than the producers intended.

The series presents extensive footage of corpses, juxtaposing those heaps with the Statue of Liberty—a monument that becomes the MacGuffin for the group of Jewish refugees the documentary discusses over its six-hour stretch. Most of those individuals were German Jews who had resources and robust networks, and who were therefore atypical Holocaust victims. Perhaps that's the point: 1930s America did not want

more Jews, and even fancy, rich ones could barely buy their way in through the golden door blocked by red tape. Among them was Anne Frank's father. He begged for help from a personal connection—a Macy's co-owner, Nathan Straus—but was defeated by draconian American visa limits. We also meet several living refugees who, in recent interviews, relate their harrowing journeys to the U.S. as children, during which many of them were separated from their parents. I spoil nothing by sharing that there are few happy endings here.

Is it America's responsibility to welcome all immigrants, or at least those in obvious danger? This moral question animates the series until it abruptly becomes irrelevant. After detailing how the outbreak of war shut down U.S. embassies and consulates in Nazi-controlled territory, the film moves on to other failures: the failure of the government to publicize the massacres (which were rigorously verified by late 1942), the failure to support underground rescue operations (the State Department even recalled the American journalist Varian Fry when his mission became diplomatically inconvenient), and later, the failure to bomb Auschwitz or otherwise directly target the Nazi murder apparatus. The series summons several American villains to account, in particular Assistant Secretary of State Samuel Breckinridge Long, a notorious anti-Semite who fought hard against Jewish immigration, tightened immigration restrictions, buried reports on the killings, shelved approvals for rescue plans, and blocked funding to relief groups, all while publicly denying those actions. This obstruction mattered: The U.S. had established important connections with people in Europe who could covertly extricate Jews from behind enemy lines, and those contacts were simply waiting for federal support for their work.

The film's hero in that situation is a young Treasury Department lawyer and whistleblower named John Pehle, along with his Jewish boss, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., who authorized a scathing report that painted the State Department as an accessory to mass murder. Morgenthau's father had been the ambassador to the Ottoman empire during the Armenian genocide, and had tried and failed to get President Woodrow Wilson to intervene. Morgenthau reminded President Franklin D. Roosevelt of this, making early use of the phrase "Never again." His efforts, we're told, led Roosevelt to create the War Refugee Board in 1944, which

provided material support to partisan fighters and European rescuers. This arc plays on-screen as a redemptive Hollywood moment, the fulfillment of what could have happened three years earlier, when the large-scale violence first started. Unfortunately, this underfunded effort began only after nearly 5 million Jews were already dead.

[Read: Auschwitz is not a metaphor](#)

The question of Roosevelt's role in all of this has been fertile ground for historians for decades. Burns has a soft spot for Franklin and Eleanor, the subjects of one of his prior films, and here he treats them with kid gloves, blaming most of the missteps on State Department antagonists. The series makes a point of establishing the bigoted, racist atmosphere of the U.S. at the time, showing Nazi rallies in New York, clips of the popular anti-Semitic broadcaster Father Charles Coughlin, and colorized footage of a Nazi-themed summer camp in New Jersey. But the film goes out of its way to outline the pros and cons of Roosevelt's decisions, leaving his reputation intact. To be clear, Roosevelt is an American icon and deserves to remain one. The problem with this approach is less about Roosevelt (there are plenty of convincing arguments in his favor, not least that *he won the war*) than about how it contradicts the rest of the film's premise. The goal of the series is seemingly to reset America's moral compass, using hindsight to expose the costs of being a bystander. But every bystander, including Roosevelt, can explain his choices. The film's refusal to judge the commander in chief plays into a larger political pattern: offering generosity only toward those we admire.

The series covers one event in particular that illustrates the outcome of this sort of equivocation. In July 1938, delegates from 32 countries met at Évian-les-Bains, in France, to discuss what to do about the hundreds of thousands of Jews attempting to leave Germany and Austria. The conference was Roosevelt's idea, to his credit. But in lieu of a real government delegation, he sent a single "special envoy," one of his businessman friends. The event was meant to display the world's humanitarianism. Instead, nearly every country, including the U.S., proclaimed how sad they were about the Jews—and then explained why they wouldn't take any more refugees. One could interpret this as diplomats balancing competing interests, but the Nazis discerned no ambiguity: The Évian Conference was *carte blanche* to kill. They

couldn't have asked for a clearer announcement that the world did not care what happened to the Jews.

Watching the rapid collapse of democracies in Adolf Hitler's path on-screen in 2022 is hard to stomach, given the shellacking that democratic norms have endured in recent years both in the U.S. and elsewhere. What's even more disturbing, though, is a realization that I arrived at only around the fourth hour of this slow-burn series, and which the filmmakers, whose patriotic optimism is obvious here, probably didn't have in mind: Democracies, for all their strengths, are ill-equipped for identifying and responding to evil.

Democracies are designed to encourage debate and to ensure that the public's wishes are expressed and enacted. Decisions are made only after information is vetted, different perspectives are weighed, and compromises are reached. As Winston Churchill put it, democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others. The reluctance of the U.S. to confront Nazi atrocity may have been a moral abdication, but that reluctance actually demonstrated the values of American democracy at work. The electorate thoroughly discussed immigration, with all sides having their say and no one's views repressed, and decided that a country barely emerging from the worst economic crisis in modern history could not absorb penniless Jews whose assets had been seized. When information emerged about genocide, elected officials took time to confirm that it was not, to use a latter-day term, "fake news." Later, military strategies to avoid bombing Auschwitz were made exactly as dictatorships would *not* make them—with concern for soldiers' lives.

That's the nice version of this story, and it's already not pretty. But a much darker side of democracy was also at work. Tyranny of the majority, while preferable to other types of tyranny, is nonetheless consequential. Immigration restrictions, for instance, were not a democratic failure; on the contrary, they were *what voters wanted*. Once war broke out, saving Jews in Europe, even in the limited ways possible, wasn't merely a low priority; it was not *what voters wanted*. As one historian in the film notes, "The War Department doesn't want the soldiers to know much about the persecution of the Jews, because they're worried they won't fight hard if they think they're secretly being

sent to save the Jews.” That omission was not a delicate balancing of policy goals. It was an elected government respecting majority sentiment. The failure to even try to save more Jews wasn’t because of some memo concealed by the State Department (despite Breckinridge Long’s efforts, everyone knew) or because it would have derailed the war effort (it wouldn’t have). It was, very clearly, because no one wanted to. None of this means that democracy isn’t our absolute best hope. It is. But something big is missing from the way our democracy envisions responsibility and respect—namely, to whom we think those values apply.

Not Idly By, an hour-long work by the filmmaker Pierre Sauvage, addresses a similar subject as *The U.S. and the Holocaust*, but with a very different style. It’s about, and almost entirely narrated by, Peter Bergson, a Jewish activist from British-occupied Palestine who came to the U.S. during World War II to shout himself hoarse about the Holocaust. *The U.S. and the Holocaust* includes Bergson’s story too—his dozens of full-page ads in major newspapers highlighting massacres that those papers buried in inside pages; his star-studded, stadium-filling pageants; his 400-rabbi march on Washington. But *The U.S. and the Holocaust* is sad, whereas *Not Idly By* is angry. Bergson, interviewed in 1978, rages with a Hebrew prophet’s fury. Nobody rages in *The U.S. and the Holocaust*, because nobody rages on PBS. A subtle condescension is built into melancholic discussions of what might have been done to save more Jews, because in the final analysis, America saving more Jews was an optional, high-minded choice that would have been made only out of charity.

The Allies’ defeat of Hitler supposedly lets us off the moral hook for all this. One of the reasons that World War II films have such broad appeal is because many follow a Hollywood trajectory: Good triumphs over evil. Unfortunately, this version of events is false. As one of the historians in Burns’s series puts it, “We do rally as a nation to defeat fascism. We just don’t rally as a nation to rescue the victims of fascism.” The Nazis lost their war against the Allies, but they won their war against the Jews.

As unfathomable as 6 million murders are, the murder of that many human beings is a grotesquely inadequate description of the losses of the Holocaust. Imagine, for instance, the deliberate murders of 6 million French civilians, including 1.5 million

French children—not merely killed in war, but slaughtered in mass executions, elderly people and babies gassed to death or burned alive. If this had happened, it would have been horrific. But out of tens of millions of French people, survivors would have outnumbered victims, and with them, France itself would have endured. In effect, the story would have been the grim-but-triumphant one we tell about the Allied victory. The same cannot be said of European Jews, who once populated up to a third of many European towns and cities, and whose ancient and complex civilization within Europe predated Christianity by centuries. This civilization, which included its own languages, school systems, libraries, theaters, and publishing and film industries, was all but burned out of the world. Judaism survived Nazism, just as it outlived its many other oppressors. But Jewish life in Europe never recovered and almost certainly never will. That is the meaning of genocide.

Humanitarian impulses are unreliable because they depend not on dignity but on pity. Preventing genocide requires more than feeling sorry for others: We have to value people who are not us precisely *because* they are not us.

The failure to honor actual differences, the failure to recognize that not everyone has to be “just like us” for us to respect them, the failure to admit that the majority may not always be right—these failures are at the root of anti-Semitism, a mental virus that continues to plague our world. A sense of benevolence is necessary but insufficient to destroy it. Defeating it would demand an entirely different level of moral imagination, a collective commitment to replacing pity with respect.

That level of imagination, if we ever attain it, could actually overcome the weak points of democracy. It would open the door to honoring not just people in danger and people in need, but people, both at home and abroad, who aren’t just like us. It might even bring new meaning to “Never again.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dara Horn

Dara Horn is the author of five novels and the essay collection *People Love Dead Jews*.

[About](#)

[Contact](#)

[Podcasts](#)

[Subscription](#)

[Follow](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) [Your Privacy Choices](#) [Advertising Guidelines](#) [Terms & Conditions](#) [Terms of Sale](#)
[Responsible Disclosure](#) [Site Map](#)

TheAtlantic.com © 2026 The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply