

**THE CONQUERORS: ROOSEVELT, TRUMAN, AND THE
DESTRUCTION OF HITLER'S GERMANY, 1941-1945¹**

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The Conquerors is victor's history. It pronounces this in its title. Its first epigraph is from Eisenhower to the German people: "We come as conquerors, but not as oppressors."³ Michael Beschloss, the author, does not cite a single German language document in the hundreds of books, documents, interviews, and papers listed in the bibliography. These omissions, however, do not mar his book. Indeed, his very point is to write this history from the winner's vantage point.

A contrast thus can be made with another recent book, John Dower's *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*.⁴ Dower's book won virtually every conceivable literary and historical prize.⁵ But the laurels obscure the clay. A work such as Dower's is groundbreaking and powerful, and yet one can never get beyond the impression that it is an exercise in tweeded sneering at the Americans who occupied and helped rebuild Japan. It may be too much to ask that even gifted historians possess a kind of Shakespearean "negative capability"—the uncanny ability to examine, with supreme objectivity and disinterestedness, historical personages—to let them, ultimately reveal, and perhaps redeem or condemn *themselves*. Few, even the most extraordinary historians are fully capable of this expressive insight.

Beschloss nonetheless possesses that particular quality of mercy in regards to his conquerors to a far greater degree than Dower. They are flawed, yet understandable, and oftentimes admirable overlords. What emerges in *The Conquerors* is that, *contra* Marx, a handful of men—neither impersonal, blind forces nor abstractions disguised as people ("the working class," "the spirit of democracy," "the Volk," etc.)—drove post-war history. Everything else appears secondary. Even plans and policies

1. MICHAEL BESCHLOSS, *THE CONQUERORS: ROOSEVELT, TRUMAN, AND THE DESTRUCTION OF HITLER'S GERMANY, 1941-1945* (2002).

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3. BESCHLOSS, *supra* note 1, at xv.

4. JOHN DOWER, *EMBRACING DEFEAT: JAPAN IN THE WAKE OF WORLD WAR II* (1999)

5. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* was awarded, among others, the 2000 Pulitzer Prize, the 1999 National Book Award, and the 2000 Bancroft Prize.

are ephemeral; mere sketches on National Geographic maps, hastily initialed policy letters, or vague directives with rule-swallowing exceptions. But if human beings, and more specifically, personalities, drive history, that means all human foibles, strengths, and weaknesses come into play. Thus, *The Conquerors* yields the painful lesson that righteous motives may lead to bad ideas, and that mixed motives can achieve good results.

If one is expecting a “greatest generation” hagiography so popular these days, *The Conquerors* disappoints. It shows, at the highest levels, the tangled strands of policy and the inner motives of the American decision makers, and the picture is not always flattering. Roosevelt, in particular, emerges as the dominant personality in this book. Beschloss reveals a complex and charming, yet also secret and devious man. A man with a keen, if superficial, intelligence and an effortless grasp of the world’s geography, Roosevelt seems to have displayed, at times, a casual, near-Olympian indifference to the fate of nations. A man with greater personal knowledge of Germany than any prior president (he visited there eight times in his youth),⁶ he retained a Francophile’s smug disregard for German culture.⁷ In a profound way, he misunderstood that culture: he would prattle on about Prussian militarism, but never really peered into the nihilistic vacuum of Nazism.⁸

Where Roosevelt emerges in all his contradiction is his dealing with the Nazi plans of Jewish genocide. Beschloss reveals what to some may seem as an extreme indifference of Roosevelt (and the American government as a whole) to the mass murder of Jews in Europe.⁹ Beschloss, though, does not engage in the moral preening typical of so many contemporary historians or armchair statesmen. He acknowledges that the Holocaust, as a recognized historical event, was not seared into the collective consciousness of the West until decades after the war was over.¹⁰ Nonetheless, what Beschloss terms “the terrible silence” of Roosevelt remains. Why did Roosevelt, even after having full and ample knowledge of death camps and the plan to exterminate Jews, do nothing and say nothing to stop

6. BESCHLOSS, *supra* note 1, at 9.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.* at 9-11, 285.

9. *Id.* at 98.

10. *Id.* at 40. Indeed, the use of the term “Holocaust” did not enter common usage in English until the 1960s and 1970s. If one looks at William Shirer’s *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, considered the seminal popular English language history on the Nazi regime, the word “Holocaust” is not found in the index or ever referenced. See WILLIAM SHIRER, *RISE AND FALL OF THE THIRD REICH* (Simon & Schuster 1990) (1959).

it for so long? As Beschloss points out, not only did Roosevelt fail to make any speech for over a year-and-a-half, he further failed to set any propaganda machinery in motion to broadcast the crimes.¹¹ The Roosevelt Administration never relaxed immigration policies for Jews—indeed in the entire United States, only one camp, in Oswego, New York, was set up for Jewish refugees.¹²

Yet Beschloss concurs with historian Arthur Schlesinger's assessment that Roosevelt deserved credit more than anyone else for "mobilizing the forces that destroyed Nazi barbarism."¹³ While he does not excuse FDR's conduct, he helps explain it. Some of it may have been, simply, cultural prejudice. Though he counted Henry Morgenthau, Jr. among his closest friends, Roosevelt might be considered, by today's standards, mildly anti-Semitic (and to a lesser degree perhaps, anti-Catholic).¹⁴ As Beschloss points out, perhaps Roosevelt's seeming indifference was really ignorance. Perhaps the truth of the genocide was so terrible, "[Roosevelt] could not comprehend that this was a crime unlike any in history."¹⁵

Furthermore, Roosevelt comes across as a man of almost brutal pragmatism. When told by a Polish underground fighter in no uncertain terms of the Nazi plan to liquidate the Jews, he replies simply: "Tell your nation we will win the war."¹⁶ Roosevelt also calculated the backlash of trumpeting Nazi crimes as well. He "never underestimated the anti-Semitism in American society."¹⁷ Perhaps speaking out against the genocide might have *unleashed* anti-Semitism in America. Roosevelt could have thought that many Americans might ask: why should our boys die for Jewish foreigners?¹⁸

This is uncomfortable, grim, but necessary reading. While it is currently fashionable to vilify certain historical personages of the period for not doing more to stop the Holocaust, Beschloss points out that many were

11. BESCHLOSS, *supra* note 1, at 38-9.

12. *Id.* at 98.

13. *Id.* at 38-9.

14. Beschloss notes that Roosevelt once stated to Morgenthau and Leo Crowley, the Irish Catholic Custodian of Alien Property: "You know this is a Protestant country, and the Catholics and Jews are here under sufferance." *Id.* at 51. The full context and meaning of this statement is not clear.

15. *Id.* at 40.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.* at 41.

18. *Id.*

perhaps culpable in their silence. Winston Churchill, for all his humane impulses, was only sporadically eager to help the Jews.¹⁹ Beschloss also points out that American Jews, to include those who fully understood what was happening, did little, partly because they did not want to appear to be “special pleaders” and perhaps risk a backlash.²⁰ Beschloss also makes it painfully clear that in the United States during this time, anti-Semitism existed in force among people whose decisions mattered—America’s political elites.²¹

In the midst of what, in retrospect, looks like moral failure, Beschloss introduces the second main figure in the book, Henry Morgenthau, Jr. Before reading *The Conquerors*, this reader had a rather low opinion of Morgenthau. However righteous his anger, the plan named for him to pastoralize Germany would undoubtedly have been catastrophic if implemented as he desired: millions would likely have suffered and died from starvation and privation, and the Soviet Union would have almost assuredly extended its reach into Western Europe.²² Yet Beschloss reveals a complex, and in many ways, admirable man. Morgenthau emerges from the book as its flawed hero.

Morgenthau was regarded as a Roosevelt lackey and yes-man, and as a Secretary of Treasury who knew more about cows than money (he was a wealthy New York landowner). He was a near-perfectly assimilated Jew, embarrassed by his origins.²³ He was also vain and star-crossed in his ambitions, and endlessly manipulable by Roosevelt—one moment confiding in Eleanor about the President’s browbeating and bullying and in the next slavishly hanging on an offhanded comment from Roosevelt that he

19. *Id.*

20. They thought this for good reason. Secretary of War Henry Stimson viewed proposals for the bombing of Auschwitz, for example, as the “special pleading of an influential American ethnic group that did not necessarily harmonize with the supreme goal of winning the war.” *Id.* at 88.

21. Beschloss, for example, reveals that Roosevelt’s Assistant Secretary of State had “deliberately blocked” efforts to find refuge for Jews in the United States and elsewhere, and had deliberately obstructed the “flow of money, information, and passports.” *Id.* at 53. Cordell Hull, Roosevelt’s hapless Secretary of State, hid his wife’s half-Jewish heritage for purely political reasons: he wanted a Presidential nomination one day. In fact, this political reason was, in Beschloss’s estimation, a factor in the State Department’s failure to do much to rescue Jews. *Id.* Stimson could also be considered anti-Semitic: he had once moved to prevent a donation from going to Columbia University because of the “tremendous Jewish influence” there. *Id.* at 88.

22. *Id.* at 285.

23. *Id.* at 46.

would “run this war together” with him, only to watch like a “jilted lover” as Roosevelt turned to others to help him fight it.²⁴

Like so many in the Roosevelt administration, initially Morgenthau did little to save any Jews. After Roosevelt rejected his proposal to acquire British or French Guiana as a Jewish haven, Morgenthau himself rejected a plea from a rabbi to intervene when Vichy, France began stopping the emigration of Jewish refugees.²⁵ As he became more aware of the crimes, however, Morgenthau seemed to regain both his conscience and his heritage. He confronted the Assistant Secretary of State who was apparently behind the deliberate blocking of aid for refugees.²⁶ He began to disregard the consequences that his pleading would have on his political career. Ultimately, Morgenthau’s prodding and pressure paid off. After over a year and a half, Roosevelt finally created the War Refugee Board, which helped save perhaps 200,000 Jews, and, in March, 1944, he spoke out in “plain language” about the genocide to the American people.²⁷

If this were a story out of Hollywood, Morgenthau’s conscience would also have brought him to the right conclusions for post-war Germany. Principle and judgment would have converged. But history is beyond the fairy-tale simplicities of the movies. Morgenthau’s noble intentions led to courageous and purposeful actions in rescuing Jews from death.²⁸ When it came to the occupation and reconstruction of Germany, however, Morgenthau’s righteous anger and intentions were not enough. Beschloss reaffirms the accepted historical judgment that the plan he set forth and wanted the Allies to implement, known to history as the “Morgenthau Plan,” was naïve, short-sighted, and harsh, all at once.²⁹

According to Morgenthau’s proposal, because the Nazi regime was “essentially the culmination of the unchanging Nazi drive toward aggression,” German society would have needed fundamental reorganization.³⁰ All German heavy industry would have been destroyed. The Ruhr Valley

24. *Id.* at 51.

25. *Id.* at 52.

26. *Id.* at 53. According to Beschloss, Morgenthau confronted Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, who was reputedly “hostile to foreigners, especially Jews” and had “been deliberately obstructing the flow of money, information and passports that might save Jews from Hitler.” *Id.*

27. *Id.* at 57-9.

28. *Id.* at 51-9.

29. *Id.* at 285.

30. *Id.* at 70-90.

would have been deindustrialized and its plants and factories stripped and sent to the Soviet Union and other victim nations.³¹ Feeding, housing, and clothing Germany would have been the responsibility of the German people themselves.³² Discussing the plan to close the Ruhr, the most productive industrial region in Europe, he said:

Just strip it. I don't care what happens to the population. I would take every mine, every mill and factory and wreck it Steel, coal, everything. Just close it down Make the Ruhr look like some of the silver mines in Nevada.³³

That such a plan would have likely condemned millions of innocent Germans (unless one accepted the notion of collective guilt) and non-Germans to a terrible fate, and perhaps led them to accept Soviet totalitarianism, did not matter. Such deprivation was surely better than the death camps they had created: "It seems inhuman," Morgenthau said.³⁴ But, as he also (rightly) pointed out, "We didn't ask for this war. We didn't put millions of people through gas chambers."³⁵ Secretary of War Henry Stimson fundamentally disagreed and opposed the plan for less idealistic reasons. While he argued that closing down the Ruhr would "starve thirty million people" and only fight "brutality with more brutality,"³⁶ he acted primarily out of national interest. He sought a strong Germany as a buffer against the Soviet Union.³⁷ And in the end, it was Stimson's version of postwar occupation that prevailed.

Up until his death in 1967, Morgenthau regarded the scuttling of his plan as a mistake and bet a young historian that Germany would go to war against the United States during his lifetime.³⁸ He was proven wrong, of course, but in retrospect, Morgenthau's plan of social engineering *in extremis* must have had an inexorable historical logic to it in 1945. Germany *had* waged the Franco-Prussian War, World War I, and World War II, each one worse than the one before; Nazism *did* extol German culture and the "Aryan race" as uniquely superior; and the soldiers of the Third Reich *did* fight ferociously, even though hopelessly outmanned and outequipped up

31. *Id.* at 115-17.

32. *Id.* at 101-03.

33. *Id.* at 103.

34. *Id.* at 104.

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.* at 106.

37. *Id.* at 107.

38. *Id.* at 252.

until very nearly the end. And when the war ended, the ghastly secrets of the death camps revealed themselves. Germany was reviled around the world as a criminal state. What further proof was needed that it was irredeemable?

The last third of Beschloss's book deals with a third major figure, Harry Truman, who dealt with the aftermath of German defeat. Beschloss makes it clear that Roosevelt left Truman with little plan or guidance after his death.³⁹ Beschloss also reveals a man far more complex than the folksy, plainspoken Missouri haberdasher turned politician. Truman is not the buck-stops-here man of certitude and conviction, but rather a man deeply insecure about his stature, his abilities, and his following in the footsteps of a statesman who had virtually made an American in his image.⁴⁰ He also held almost childish grudges (he seemed to have near irrationally detested Morgenthau). He was a man not immune to popular prejudices: in private, he referred to New York City as "Kiketown."⁴¹

Yet Truman, in his complexity, emerges as a man greater than the sum of his flaws. Truman was, in many ways, as insightful as Roosevelt. He was a closet intellectual and voracious reader, and he could combine the measured judgment of a great statesman with the gut instinct of a small town politico. He was probably a cruder anti-Semite than Roosevelt, yet as early as 1943, he stated that Hitler's war against the Jews was "not a Jewish problem" but an "American problem."⁴² His scuttling of the Morgenthau Plan was likely driven in part by a crude and mean-spirited disliking of Morgenthau,⁴³ but also genuine insight and historical understanding. Ultimately, Beschloss deems him as a man who was suited for and rose to the challenge. Beschloss does not accept the revisionist view that Truman blundered the world into the Cold War.⁴⁴ Rather, Truman grasped, in a way Roosevelt did not, that the postwar world would not be one of universal harmony, and that a vindictive occupation of Germany was the wrong policy in that new and dangerous world Beschloss writes, "He knew that with the Cold War accelerating, a weak, inert Germany

39. *Id.* at 216-18.

40. *Id.* at 219-220, 229.

41. *Id.* at 229.

42. *Id.* at 255.

43. According to Beschloss, years after Morgenthau left the Cabinet, Truman told friends that Morgenthau was a "nut," and a "blockhead" who didn't know s--- from apple butter." *Id.* at 249.

44. See, e.g., HOWARD ZINN, A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES chap. 16 (1980).

might open the way to Soviet force in Europe. . . . [L]etting Germany collapse would have had vastly more grievous consequences than Morgenthau had predicted.”⁴⁵

Truman ultimately got Morgenthau out of his cabinet. Although the document that would implement the German occupation, Joint Chiefs of Staff Directive 1067,⁴⁶ had “Morgenthau”-like language, it ultimately provided sufficient flexibility and enough loopholes to enable Germany to rebuild and reindustrialize. Truman, Stimson, Marshall, and perhaps most importantly, the American military governor, General Lucius Clay, set in motion the great German political and economic recovery.

What then happened defied the dire predictions of Morgenthau and others who thought Germany could only be changed through harsh measures and over the course of generations. In retrospect, it appears that these Cassandras did not appreciate several key factors. By May, 1945, Germany had not simply been defeated, it had been obliterated as no nation had been in modern history. Its cities lay in ash and cinder, its governmental institutions were shattered, and its people teetered on the edge of mass starvation. It was reviled among the community of nations for its savage injustice, its outright aggression, and its terrible genocide. As the Soviets cut a swath of death and rape in its westward advance, the German people fled, terrified, into the arms of the West.⁴⁷ And Hitler was dead. The German Fascist state rested upon *Führerprinzip*—the embodiment of the state in one man. Hitler *was* National Socialism. Powerfully and skillfully, the failed artist had “aestheticized” politics for the world’s most culturally sophisticated people. With the performer dead, the performance, quite literally, concluded.⁴⁸ Partly out of national interest, partly out of keen

45. BESCHLOSS, *supra* note 1, at 289.

46. *Id.* at 169-70.

47. Beschloss recites the familiar statistic that perhaps two million German women were raped by Soviet soldiers during their westward advance. *Id.* at n.5, 234.

48. George Orwell references the kind of Wagnerian heroism that Hitler’s bombast evoked: “Whereas socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people, ‘I offer you a good time,’ Hitler has said to them, ‘I offer you struggle, danger, and death,’ and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet.” *Quoted in* FREDERICK SPOTTS, *HITLER AND THE POWER OF AESTHETICS* (2003). Spotts brilliantly explores Hitler’s “aesthetic politics” in his book.

insight, Truman in particular grasped these points more readily than Morgenthau did.

Beschloss ultimately concludes that the American statesmen, primarily Roosevelt, Morgenthau, and Truman, were flawed but worthy men. He perhaps overstates his case when, near the end of the book he asserts that “Franklin Roosevelt had more influence than any other non-German on what Hitler’s nation has now become.”⁴⁹ Roosevelt was dead before the occupation even began, and he laid out general and sometimes contradictory guidance. Indeed, General Lucius Clay, the American military governor of Germany from 1945-49, was far more important in postwar German history than Roosevelt, Truman, Morgenthau, Marshall, or any other American statesman of the era.⁵⁰ (Clay is, in this reader’s estimation, a soldier-statesman on a par with Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Marshall.) Nonetheless, Beschloss is right to give credit to Roosevelt, especially for grappling with postwar problems when triumph was still uncertain. He is right to praise Morgenthau’s courage in seeking to rescue Jews, even though he was proven ultimately wrong in seeking a harsh peace for Germany. He is right to pay tribute to Truman’s ability to deal with a changed world after the fall of the German Reich.

One should be wary of finding easy parallels and analogies to the present situation in Iraq. Such comparisons can be helpful, but too often come freighted with forced analogies, factual errors, and sweeping generalizations. Beschloss’s book is ultimately about character, not policy, so perhaps few direct lessons will be found in it. In *The Conquerors*, one sees flawed yet purposeful men. Sometimes they acted out of self-interest, sometimes out of national interest, and sometimes out of a genuine concern to save others from destruction. What ultimately matters in Beschloss’s book is not *what* document was signed or what plan was enacted, but *who* wrote it, who argued for or against it, and who put it into action. The truth of history, *The Conquerors* seems to say, lies not in the stars but in ourselves.

49. BESCHLOSS, *supra* note 1, at 288.

50. Again, to his credit, Beschloss acknowledges that after Potsdam, the “story of Americans in Germany was...Lucius Clay’s.” He devotes a short chapter to Clay’s military governorship for Germany. *Id.* at 271-283.

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