

HILLEL KOOK'S EFFORTS TO SAVE EUROPEAN JEWS DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Eden Bernstein

HIS 122: United States History Since 1865

May 14, 2025

In the fight to rescue European Jews during the Holocaust, Hillel Kook led the most effective and bold effort of them all. The most significant effort in the United States to rescue European Jews during the Holocaust was Hillel Kook's because of the tactics he used to increase the number of Jews he could play a role in saving. Kook was extremely effective in raising awareness about the Holocaust. He was strategic in his outreach by targeting his efforts toward people with political influence, and creating advertisements that would gain a lot of attention. Additionally, Kook had ambitious yet achievable goals. While he understood the gravity of the situation, he took it upon himself to strive for what others deemed unachievable through his organizations to save as many European Jews as possible. Finally, his efforts were particularly remarkable, as they achieved a far greater impact than those of the government, effectively compensating for America's insufficient response to the crisis.

Kook fundamentally changed the narrative surrounding the murder of Jews in Europe during the Holocaust in several ways in order to inspire citizens to step up. As Eran Kaplan explains in his journal article, "Kook also transformed the tone of the Jewish public discourse in America—no longer a careful tone, fearful of antagonizing the non-Jewish public, but blunt, full-page advertisements with explicit messages."¹ Kook's use of bold, unfiltered messaging replaced the previously hesitant rhetoric, forcing the American public to face the full magnitude of the tragedy. This strategy was not merely about raising awareness; it was an intentional effort to push action. By reducing ignorance and presenting the Holocaust as an undeniable reality, Kook impeded the tendency to dismiss or downplay its severity. His insistence on urgency ensured that the Holocaust was no longer a distant European affliction, but rather a pressing moral concern for Americans. Kook's signature technique proved highly effective in reducing

¹ Eran Kaplan, "A Rebel with a Cause: Hillel Kook, Begin and Jabotinsky's Ideological Legacy," *Israel Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 91, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30245768>.

denial and minimizing the downplaying of the Holocaust, successfully transforming it into a pressing topic in America and reflecting his deep commitment, strategic success, and passion for increasing awareness of the atrocities endured by European Jews.

Kook did not stop at simply spreading awareness; instead, he extended his efforts by attempting to get people of high status to join him in his fight. As *American Jewish History* states, “From that point on, the Army centered its efforts on building public pressure for rescue action and lobbying members of Congress and administration officials to create support for government rescue steps.”² Kook did not accept solely small efforts within his organization; instead, he effectively expanded the members of his organization to people with power because of his correct notion that it would attract outside attention. He was not afraid to shift from his “brand’s” pre-existing goals, which mainly consisted of rescuing European Jews and bringing them to Israel. Kook’s recognition of his limited influence compared to the American government shaped his strategic approach, reinforcing the necessity of obtaining governmental involvement in his resistance efforts. His ability to gather public support not only amplified his mission but also significantly expanded the scope of Jewish lives saved, demonstrating the power of collective action.

Kook’s powerful play to raise awareness about the Holocaust prompted many to provide support for Kook’s endeavors, which would not have been possible without his unique tactics and valiant fight. As was described by Elizabeth A. Bryant in *Reviews in American History*, “It played in major cities across the United States, and many prominent Americans including Eleanor Roosevelt, approximately 300 Senators and Congressmen, and several Supreme Court justices...

² Hillel Kook, Peter Bergson, and David S. Wyman, “The Bergson Group, America, and the Holocaust: A Previously Unpublished Interview with Hillel Kook / Peter Bergson,” *American Jewish History* 89, no. 1 (2001): 5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23886204>.

watched this production.”³ This quote exhibits a clear application of the actions Kook stated he would take because they aligned with his values and was a step toward reaching his outlined goal of saving as many European Jews as possible. This wide recognition strengthened Kook’s efforts, helping to heighten the urgency of his mission and increase American public engagement with the tragic events occurring in Europe. Through Kook’s creativity in publicizing the significance of rescuing European Jews, he successfully gained public support, transforming his advocacy into a movement that made a difference throughout political environments and ultimately contributed largely to the saving of Jews.

Hillel Kook was determined to inspire action against Jewish persecution, as well as take direct action himself. As Kook stated in an interview, “...the word "Jew" was not even uttered; as much as they could help it, they did as they could help it, they avoided it...”⁴ Kook’s insistence on confronting the reality of Jewish persecution set him apart from the prevalent apathy in America, where avoidance of the issue was extremely common. His awareness of this indifference became the driving force behind his relief efforts. His success was possible not because of strategy, but in a moral drive to awaken public consciousness. The success attained by Kook can be attributed to his genuine concern for the lives of Jews, and his righteousness in his resolute push for Americans to care about the Holocaust. This proves that Kook’s efforts to save European Jews during the Holocaust were the most significant of those from America because they not only reflected his strong opposition to governmental inaction but also directly influenced rescue initiatives, reinforcing his role as a primary contributor in saving lives.

³ Elizabeth A. Bryant, "Review of *Friend or Foe? Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Jews*, by Rafael Medoff,” *Reviews in American History* 43, no. 2 (2015): 316, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43663570>.

⁴ Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah Collection: Interview with Peter Bergson and Samuel Merlin*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 15, 1978.

Some might argue that Roosevelt and the U.S. government played the most crucial role in rescuing European Jews, however this is false because Kook's efforts were much more effective in spreading awareness and forming larger relief groups. As Sarah E. Peck illustrates, "Meanwhile, the continuing inaction by the United States government appalled Bergson and his fellow CJA activists."⁵ This quote highlights Kook's (Bergson's) unwavering dedication, and the American government's passive approach, demonstrating that Kook's higher standards and commitment were far more effective when applied. His ability to accumulate support and drive real action not only advertised the urgency of the crisis, but also set a precedent for activism in similar Jewish movements that the government had failed to prioritize. Kook's leadership within his organization, alongside fellow activists, serves as clear evidence of his dedication to the cause. The extreme contrast between his success and determination versus the government's shortcomings further exemplifies his contributions as the most significant in organizing relief and advocating for European Jews during the Holocaust.

Kook's dedication to saving European Jews during the Holocaust confirms his legacy as a true hero. The most significant effort in the United States to rescue European Jews during the Holocaust was Hillel Kook's because of the tactics he used to increase the number of Jews he could play a role in saving. Kook was extremely effective in raising awareness about the Holocaust, he had ambitious yet achievable goals, and his efforts made up for the lack thereof from the Government. Kook's rescue efforts inspired many other European Jews who had the opportunity to flee to the United States, leading to the greater influx of Jews in America. Additionally, his acts inspired Jewish activism that followed, and kept stories about the Holocaust relevant. Overall, Kook showed commitment to Jewish people through the

⁵ Sarah E. Peck, "The Campaign for an American Response to the Nazi Holocaust, 1943-1945," *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 2 (1980): 373, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260518>.

organizations he played a role in, as well as his aggressive advertising of the cause and compensation for the less than sufficient care put in by the American government.

Bibliography

- Bryant, Elizabeth A. "Review of *Friend or Foe? Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Jews*, by Rafael Medoff." *Reviews in American History* 43, no. 2 (2015): 314–19.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43663570>.
- Kaplan, Eran. "A Rebel with a Cause: Hillel Kook, Begin and Jabotinsky's Ideological Legacy." *Israel Studies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 87–103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30245768>.
- Kook, Hillel, Peter Bergson, and David S. Wyman. "The Bergson Group, America, and the Holocaust: A Previously Unpublished Interview with Hillel Kook / Peter Bergson." *American Jewish History* 89, no. 1 (2001): 3–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23886204>.
- Lanzmann, Claude. *Shoah Collection: Interview with Peter Bergson and Samuel Merlin*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 15, 1978.
- Peck, Sarah E. "The Campaign for an American Response to the Nazi Holocaust, 1943-1945." *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 2 (1980): 367–400.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/260518>.