From her hiding place, four small rooms located behind a bookcase in a house in Amsterdam, 14-year-old Anne Frank somehow learned that Allied troops had invaded Normandy. “This is the day,” she wrote in her diary, on June 6, 1944. “Would the long-awaited liberation that has been talked of so much, but which still seems too wonderful, too much like a fairy tale, ever come true?” she asked. “Could we be granted victory this year, 1944?”

Although World War II would not end until 1945, Jay Winik reminds us that in 1944 the Allies concluded, “beyond any doubt,” that they would defeat the Nazis. Anne Frank and her family would board the last deportation train from the Netherlands to Auschwitz in August 1944. These are some of the historical connections covered in “1944: FDR and the Year That Changed History” by historian Jay Winik.

In “1944,” Mr. Winik, whose previous books include “The Great Upheaval: America and the Birth of the Modern World,” “1788-1800” and “April 1865: The Month That Saved America,” tells the story of the war in Europe — and the fate of millions of Jews on the continent. Like the historians who have preceded him, Mr. Winik celebrates the defeat of Hitler’s Third Reich, “one of the worst regimes ever known to mankind,” but laments the failure of the United States to take steps that could have saved many, many innocent lives.

In explaining the refusal of the United States to act, Mr. Winik reminds us that the State Department in the 1940s was filled with anti-Semites, including Breckinridge Long, the influential head of the visa section. Officials in the department suppressed information about concentration camps and crematoria, put up bureaucratic roadblocks to admitting refugees, and opposed bombing raids to destroy Nazi death camps.

Mr. Winik, however, is at pains to explain the unwillingness of Franklin D. Roosevelt to address the
“Holocaust increasingly unfolding in plain sight.” The president, he emphasizes, knew about the atrocities being committed against the Jews. Given his popularity, prodigious political talent, leadership skills, and his capacity to inspire, Mr. Winik maintains, FDR could have aroused Americans to “make this a war for human liberation.” President Roosevelt was preoccupied, of course, by the exigencies of winning the global conflict, crafting the postwar peace, by his campaign for a fourth term as president, and by his rapidly deteriorating health. The question, however, remains: Why “was he not shocked into creative action? How was it that he seemed incapable of confronting the crux of the problem — the millions of Jewish men, women, and children held hostage by the Nazi regime and slated for the gas chambers?”

Part of the answer, alas, lies in the xenophobia and anti-Semitism pervasive in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Although polls during these years indicated that Americans did not approve of Hitler’s treatment of Jews, a majority of respondents continued to oppose increasing immigration quotas or relaxing entry rules for them. FDR, it seems clear, did not want to challenge the prejudices of his fellow citizens.

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s stewardship of World War II and his defense of democracy and freedom were indeed, “monumental achievements.” His (admittedly belated) establishment of a War Refugee Board did save several hundred thousand individuals who might well have been slaughtered by the Nazis.

That said, Mr. Winik is surely right to regret that President Roosevelt, an eloquent, principled man of action (despite his handicap), missed “his own Emancipation Proclamation moment.” A moment in which he could have made World War II “about the vast human tragedy occurring in Nazi controlled Europe.” A moment that would be eminently relevant in a 21st century that has more than its share of people desperate to escape murderous — and genocidal — tyrants.

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