



# 1944:

## FDR and the Year that Changed History

By JAY WINIK



### KIRKUS REVIEW

An accomplished popular historian unpacks the last full year of World War II and the excruciatingly difficult decisions facing Franklin Roosevelt.

Allied military victories during 1944 assured the eventual surrender of Nazi Germany, accounting for what Winston Churchill called “the greatest outburst of joy in the history of mankind.” And yet Winik (*The Great Upheaval: America and the Birth of the Modern World, 1788-1800, 2007, etc.*) asks whether, by focusing so wholly on winning the war, Roosevelt missed “his own Emancipation Proclamation moment,” the chance to make the war about something bigger, specifically “the vast humanitarian tragedy occurring in Nazi-controlled Europe.” FDR’s failure to address unequivocally the Holocaust, the millions of deaths that left “a gaping, tormenting hole echoing in history,” has frustrated historians for decades. More in sorrow than in anger, Winik explains this apparent moral lapse by the world’s foremost humanitarian. Preoccupied with his 1944 re-election and mollifying various political constituencies, supervising the invasion of the European continent, holding together a contentious alliance, and intent on destroying Hitler, Roosevelt was also in extremely precarious health. Moreover, a sluggish, indifferent government bureaucracy, likely tinged with anti-Semitism—here, Secretary of State Cordell Hull and the War Department’s John J. McCloy take a beating—either ignored or thwarted any plan to relieve or rescue refugees or liberate prisoners in the death camps. Still, as Winik vividly demonstrates in a number of set pieces featuring escapees, underground leaders, and government advocates for relief, surely by 1944 FDR *knew*: about the camps, the atrocities, the desperate refugees, and, as one memo sternly warned, “the acquiescence of this government in the murder of Jews.” Still, beyond the belated establishment of the War Refugee Board, the president faltered. The author’s fair assessment of the evidence, detailed scene-setting, deft storytelling, and sure-handed grasp of this many-stranded narrative will inspire any reader to rethink this issue. Do we ask too much of Roosevelt or too little?

A complex history rendered with great color and sympathy.