

TEACHER GUIDE:

Exploring the *Americans and the Holocaust* Exhibition

OVERVIEW

By exploring *Americans and the Holocaust*, students will learn about American responses to Nazism, war, and genocide in the 1930s and 1940s. Individual stories - ranging from government officials to journalists to citizens - highlight the variety of choices and actions made by Americans at all levels of society. This lesson promotes reflection and critical thinking about the various factors that shaped American attitudes, the potential for individual action, and America's role in the world during that time and today.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS TO CONSIDER:

1. What information was available to Americans?
2. What factors shaped American debates about how to respond?
3. What actions did the U.S. government or military take?
4. What actions did American citizens take?

THE EXHIBITION EXPLORES THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

What Did Americans Know?

Americans had access to a significant amount of information about the threat of Nazism during the 1930s and 1940s, although this information did not translate into a sustained movement to aid European Jews.

Did Americans Help Jewish Refugees?

As the refugee crisis in Europe began and intensified, the US government tightened the already restrictive immigration process. Still, some Americans overcame enormous challenges to aid Jewish refugees.

Why Did Americans Go to War?

With Europe at war, Americans prioritized national security and staying out of the war, while President Franklin D. Roosevelt prepared the nation for intervention. The United States government produced propaganda showing World War II as a fight for democracy and against fascism: the United States did not go to war to rescue Jews.

How Did Americans Respond to the Holocaust?

News that Nazi Germany had a plan to murder European Jews reached the United States in late 1942. After pressure from inside and outside the government, President Franklin Roosevelt announced that it was US policy to rescue Jews and other persecuted minorities, but by that time, nearly five million Jews had already been killed. Americans were shocked by images of the liberation of concentration camps.

GRADE LEVEL:

Recommended for students in 8th grade and up

TIME:

Field-trip for exhibition visit and follow-up in-class discussion

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will learn that information about the Nazi threat was available to Americans throughout the time period leading up to and during the Holocaust.
- Students will analyze how contextual factors - economic upheaval, national security concerns, political climate, and racial intolerance - informed American debates and response to Nazi policies, the refugee crisis, and the war.
- Students will learn that Americans at all levels of society responded to Nazi persecution and murder of Jews in a variety of ways, sometimes in the face of risks and challenges.
- Students will reflect upon the questions that this history raises about the potential for individual action and America's role in the world.

TEACHER PREPARATION:

- Before exploring the exhibition, ensure students have a basic understanding of the Holocaust.
 - The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum defines the Holocaust as the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Explore the [“Introduction to the Holocaust”](#) article from the USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia for more information about this topic.
 - To introduce the Holocaust in one lesson:
 - You may choose to use the “Overview of the Holocaust” lesson plan that accompanies a viewing of the short 38 minute film *Path to Nazi Genocide* or additional teaching resources available on the USHMM website: <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/teaching-materials/holocaust>
 - To introduce American history and the Holocaust in one lesson:
 - You may choose to use [“The United States and the Holocaust”](#) article from the USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia
- Familiarize yourself with the content of the *Americans and the Holocaust* exhibition.
 - Visit your local library to view the exhibition.
 - Explore the *Americans and the Holocaust* [online exhibition](#)
- Print the [graphic organizer](#) for distribution to students. See link here for [teacher answer key](#).
- Communicate with the library staff well in advance of your visit.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Access to the *Americans and the Holocaust* traveling exhibition at your local library
- Graphic organizer
- Students may choose to photograph sections of the exhibition on their personal devices if the student presentation slideshow is assigned (optional)

PROCEDURE:

Introduce the Exhibition

By exploring *Americans and the Holocaust*, students will learn about American responses to Nazism, war, and genocide in the 1930s and 1940s. Individual stories - ranging from government officials to journalists to individuals/citizens - highlight the variety of choices and actions made by Americans at all levels of society. This lesson promotes reflection and critical thinking about the various factors that shaped American attitudes, the potential for individual action, and America's role in the world during that time and today.

Explain to students that they will be exploring several guiding questions in this lesson. [5 minutes]

1. What information was available to Americans?
2. What factors shaped American debates about how to respond?
3. What actions did the U.S. government or military take?
4. What actions did American citizens take?

Exploring the Exhibition (at the library)

- Instruct students to explore the entire exhibition, examining images, text, and media pieces, in order to respond to the prompt on their graphic organizer.
- Divide students into groups or pairs. Each group can be assigned primary responsibility for one of the four graphic organizer prompts. Each prompt requires a list of 3-4 answers. [30 minutes]
- When they have finished exploring, students will select one example from their list and work independently to answer four reflection questions about that example. [10-15 minutes]
- Either independently or in groups, students should prepare to share a summary of their prompt that answers the corresponding guiding question. [10 minutes]

Sharing and Discussion (in the classroom)

- Students share their findings with the other groups. This can be done either as a jigsaw (in small groups of one student from each research group) or as groups reporting to the whole class. Students may share photos from the exhibition and personal stories they discovered in addition to the content they learned in the exhibition, and explain to other students how the evidence they collected shapes their understanding of American responses to the Holocaust. [20-30 minutes]
 - *Option: Have students prepare a slideshow to answer their guiding question using images and information from the *Americans and the Holocaust* exhibition to share with the class.*
- Either back in small groups or in a whole-class discussion, return to the questions asked in the exhibition. Compare and contrast conclusions drawn from each prompt and the individual stories that support these conclusions. [10-15 minutes]
 - What did Americans know?
 - Did Americans help Jewish refugees?
 - Why did Americans go to War?
 - How did Americans respond to the Holocaust?

Synthesis and Conclusion

What do these examples reveal about Americans' responses to Nazism and what actions were possible? What topic, person, or event would you like to learn more about? [5 minutes] (whole group discussion or written piece for assessment)

Opportunities of Reflection

Students may reflect on the questions below in writing, using both historical content discovered in the traveling exhibition and other independent research. The questions may be used for an in-depth concluding discussion in class.

- Knowledge of ongoing atrocities does not always lead to action. What conditions might motivate people to help each other? What conditions might make people turn away?
- With so many news stories breaking every day, what are some ways Americans today could remember and act on humanitarian values to confront hatred, preserve human dignity, and prevent genocide?
- This exhibition shows us the impact immigration policy had on individual lives. What can we learn from the actions and decisions made by American policy makers and government officials in the 1930s and 1940s?

STANDARDS:

C3 Framework

- **D2.His.1.9-12.** Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- **D2.His.2.9-12.** Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
- **D2.His.3.9-12.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.
- **D2.His.4.9-12.** Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
- **D2.His.5.9-12.** Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.
- **D2.His.14.9-12.** Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.
- **D2.His.16.9-12.** Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

Common Core

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Should you choose to expand the lesson with your students, you may wish to consult these USHMM resources:

- [Teaching Materials](#) on *Americans and the Holocaust*
 - Lesson plans related to the content of the exhibition:
 - Exploring the Online Exhibition
 - Interpreting News of World Events 1933-1938
 - Immigration and Refugees: A Case-Study on the Wagner-Rogers Bill
 - Isolation or Intervention? A Case-Study on the Lend-Lease Act
- History Unfolded Teacher Guide
 - Engaging students in research related to the *Americans and the Holocaust* exhibition
- [Teaching Materials](#) on the Holocaust
 - Foundational lesson plans for teaching about the Holocaust:
 - Overview of the Holocaust
 - Timeline Activity
 - History of Antisemitism and the Holocaust
 - Using Survivor Testimony
- Check out the USHMM bibliography of young adult and children's books on this topic