

TEACHER GUIDE:

Americans and the Holocaust Traveling 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.

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 responses 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.
 - Define the Holocaust with your students before their visit to the exhibition. Use the Museum's [15-minute Definition Activity](#) with your students, if needed. If you have more time, consider the Museum's [Introduction to the Holocaust](#) one-day lesson.
- 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](#)
- Distribute the [graphic organizer](#) to students. Review [the answer key](#), if needed.
- Make any necessary arrangements for the visit to the library.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Access to the *Americans and the Holocaust* traveling exhibition at your local library
- [Graphic organizer](#)

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE:**1. Introduce the Exhibition (before or at the start of your visit)**

Tell the students: 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 individual 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]

- What information was available to Americans?
- What factors shaped American debates about how to respond?
- What actions did the US government or military take?
- What actions did American citizens take?

2. 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]

3. Sharing and Discussion (in the classroom)

Students share their findings with the other groups. This can be done either as a jigsaw 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]

- *Extension: 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. They can use pictures they took of the exhibition or images they found in the online exhibition or on the USHMM website.*

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?

4. Synthesis and Conclusion

As a class discussion or writing assignment, have students answer the following: 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]

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:
 - [American Responses to the Holocaust Timeline Extension](#)
 - [Behind Every Name Animated Videos and Lesson Plan](#)
 - [Challenges of Escape Lesson Plan](#)

- o [Black Americans and the Nazi Olympics Lesson Plan](#)
- Primary source research through local newspapers: [History Unfolded Teacher Guide](#)
 - o Engaging students in research related to the *Americans and the Holocaust* exhibition
- [Teaching Materials on the Holocaust](#)
 - o [Introduction to the Holocaust One-Day Lesson](#)
 - o [Timeline Activity](#)
 - o [The Path to Nazi Genocide, 38-minute film and worksheet](#)
 - o [History of Antisemitism and the Holocaust Lesson](#)
 - o [Teaching with Survivor Testimony Lesson](#)
- Review the [USHMM list of Holocaust-related books to use in the classroom](#)