

EXPLORING PRIMARY SOURCES FOR IN-DEPTH ENGAGEMENT WITH *AMERICANS AND THE HOLOCAUST*

EXPERIENCING HISTORY: HOLOCAUST SOURCES IN CONTEXT - WWW.EXPERIENCINGHISTORY.COM

What is Experiencing History?

Experiencing History is a digital learning tool that explores the Holocaust through unique, original, contextualized sources. With this tool, you can read, watch, and examine the experiences of everyday people to analyze how genocide unfolded. Learn about the Holocaust by engaging with a variety of sources from the period. Discover a diary, a letter, a newspaper article, or a policy paper; see a photograph, or watch film footage. Discuss the complex context from which the Holocaust emerged, and consider the importance of primary sources for understanding our world.

Topic: Immigration and Refugees

The following sources in Experiencing History illuminate the topic of immigration and the refugee crisis from a variety of perspectives. These sources ask us to consider: What did the vast bureaucratic web of immigration paperwork look like on a personal level? How did refugees understand their own plight as they were experiencing it? How did those advocating on their behalf frame their case for the American public? From Jewish refugees attempting to locate family members, to those trying to find safe haven, to those advocating on their behalf, these sources illuminate the complex questions that this topic raises through personal stories and reflections.

[Report on the work of the refugee committee, American Friends Service Committee, 1940](#)

Report outlining the activities of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in refugee aid. These activities included both evacuating refugees from Europe and assisting in their adjustment to life in the United States.

[Behind the fence: inked print by Miriam Sommerberg, Fort Ontario, Oswego, NY, 1944-1945](#)

Ink print created as an advertisement for a musical she wrote about her experience at Fort Ontario entitled, "The Golden Cage." The musical outlined the harsh conditions and state of limbo for Jews who were designated "guests of the President" and not legally allowed to enter the US until December 1945.

[Time races death: what are we waiting for? \(New York Times ad, December 17, 1943\)](#)

Full page New York Times ad taken out by the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe on December 17, 1943, urging American support for the "Rescue Resolution" that would help "formulate and effectuate a plan of immediate action designed to save the surviving Jewish people of Europe from extinction at the hands of Nazi Germany." The debate surrounding this resolution eventually led to the establishment of the War Refugee Board in January of 1944.

[The St. Louis is Close to Cuba \(Havaner Leben, June 3, 1939\)](#)

Newspaper article from the Havana Jewish community discussing what measures might be taken on behalf of the St. Louis refugee ship circling in waters 20 miles from Cuba.

[Correspondence between Franz Blumenstein and the American Friends Service Committee, 1940-1946](#)

Correspondence between Franz Blumenstein and the AFSC regarding the fate of his wife, son, and mother, who had been passengers on the St. Louis and slated to join him in Havana, later, Sosua, and eventually the United States.

Topic: American responses to Nazi Germany prior to World War II

American responses to Nazi Germany were wide-ranging and reflected the ways that different publics understood the fascist threat abroad. While some saw Nazi persecution and violence as specific to Jews, others understood these actions through the lens of their own group history. These sources ask us to consider: How and why was Nazi persecution seen as part of larger systems and histories of oppression and violence occurring at the same moment? Why did some sectors of the American public frame such persecution as a threat to America and democratic values? How did these concepts inform the ways that Americans understood--and therefore responded--to the Nazi threat as it unfolded?

[Three Personal Letters Concerning the Sale of German Goods from Department Stores in the United States, October 2, 1933](#)

Three letters to the Brooklyn Daily Eagle regarding the sale of German goods in American department stores. A customer wrote complaining about German goods sold at Macy's Department Store (owned by Jewish businessman Percy Straus) about six months into the boycott movement. Straus replies that it is up to the customer what they choose to buy, and that the German goods helped to support German Jewish businesses.

[Bodo Morgenster, Hitler's Dream, 1933](#)

Self-published poem (in Yiddish and English) that consists of a satirical conversation between Hitler, Haman (villain of the Purim story who sought to exterminate the Jews of Persia), and Pharaoh about how to best deal with the Jews. It folds in a conversation of the proposed boycott of German goods and ends with a call for all readers to do the same.

[Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Editorial, New Amsterdam News, May 2, 1936](#)

Editorial published in one of the country's most prominent African American newspapers speaking against US participation in the 1936 Berlin Olympics on the grounds that Germany was racist, antisemitic, and anti-Christian.

[Radio Broadcast from Catholic University, November 16, 1938](#)

On November 16, 1938, about a week after these antisemitic pogroms seized Nazi Germany, the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC issued a radio broadcast condemning violence against the Jewish community. The broadcast brought together bishops, priests, and a Catholic layman from different parts of the country to publicly denounce Nazi cruelty and to affirm Church support for Jewish communities. This effort, one of the first coordinated responses to state-sanctioned persecution of German Jews, represented a rarity for Catholic leaders in the United States: rarely had the Church defended the religious rights of non-Catholics.

[Now we think, Philadelphia Tribune, October 18, 1941](#)

A series of "person on the street" comments and short interviews conducted in response to famous aviator Charles Lindbergh's isolationist speech one month before. In this speech, Lindbergh blames Jews as the major force driving the effort towards war. The Philadelphia Tribute (an African American newspaper) interviewed a number of men and women who had differing responses to Lindbergh, from support, to ambivalence, to harsh criticism.

Topic: Race, Eugenics, and American antisemitism

At the same time that Nazi Germany was enacting laws and state-structures to legalize, promote, and enact antisemitism, mass violence, and ultimately, genocide, racist and antisemitic ideas and actions also flourished in the United States. The following sources explore the ways in which these ideas manifested themselves on American soil, from the normalization of eugenics, to a racially segregated military, to antisemitism that impacted local Jewish communities. How do these ideas--aired publically in different ways--contribute to the general environment in which Americans responded to or understood the Nazi threat abroad?

[Eugenics Chart from the Kansas Free Fair, 1929](#)

Eugenics chart used as part of health and hygiene exhibitions at the Kansas Free Fair, 1929. This poster advocates the belief that certain traits--"feeble-mindedness," "abnormality," "alcoholism," "pauperism," among others--can be "bred out" of a given family. This chart is extremely resonant with similar Nazi-based materials of the mid 1930s.

[Letter from Reverend Hugh M. Newland to his "Jewish friends and neighbors," October 10, 1938](#)

Letter from Reverend Hugh M. Newland, pastor of Wynnefield United Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, distributed amongst his predominantly Jewish neighborhood. The letter strongly invokes friendship between Christians and Jews and implies that it is in response to either rising antisemitism in the world or a specific incident or sentiment locally.

[The Jewish Hymn: Onward Christian Soldiers, 1939](#)

Self-published flyer by Robert Edward Edmondson (later charged with sedition for pro-Nazi writing) accusing Jews of controlling the push towards war as part of a larger economic conspiracy.

[German Leaflet for African American Soldiers, 1944](#)

German propaganda leaflet dropped behind Allied lines aimed specifically at African American soldiers. Capitalizing on racial tensions and inequality in the US, the leaflet encourages defection to Germany to receive better treatment.

[Untitled Drawing by Arthur Szyk, 1948](#)

Unpublished postwar drawing by refugee Arthur Szyk, Jewish refugee and artist, depicting an African American veteran with a purple heart being pursued by klansmen. The two inscriptions read: "Do not forgive them, oh Lord, for they do know what they do," and "Each Negro lynching is a national disaster, a stab in the back to our government in its desperate struggle for democracy."

Topic: Americans at War

The American government, popular culture, and American institutions viewed World War II as a battle to preserve American democracy and ideals. The sources here depict the many ways in which Americans recognized the values that they were defending, including the reflections of those who felt excluded from the supposed justice and equality that America promised. How did our involvement in World War II both sharpen the American idea while also laying bare its shortcomings? How does examining these contemporary responses change our perspective on the ways that the American public understood World War II and the Holocaust?

[Desecration of Religion, May 1943](#)

Photo of an exhibition entitled, The Nature of the Enemy, appearing in New York City, in May of 1943. This series of tableaus explains Nazism as a fundamental threat to American values, such as religion, justice, and family.

[Americans will always fight for liberty, 1943](#)

Produced by the U.S. Government Office of War Information, this poster frames US involvement in World War II as a natural extension of the country's founding revolutionary fight for liberty. These posters were often created by leading artists and graphic designers of the time and were meant to appeal to Americans' sense of patriotism and justice.

[Oral History with Leon Bass, March 16, 1988](#)

US Army Sergeant Leon Bass discusses both the institutional racism that he felt as a member of the segregated armed forces while also reflecting on what he saw and experienced in Buchenwald and how it changed his perspective on racism, antisemitism, and mass violence. He discusses how: "I came into that camp an angry black soldier. Angry at my country and justifiably so. Angry because they were treating me as though I was not good enough. But [that day] I came to the realization that human suffering could touch us all... Buchenwald was the face of evil... It was racism."

[Should I Sacrifice to Live "Half-American," The Pittsburgh Courier, January 31, 1942](#)

Editorial written by enlisted serviceman James G. Thompson of Wichita, Kansas, this article advocates for the "double V campaign" (victory at home, victory abroad). Published a little over a year after the invasion of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Thompson asks: "Should I sacrifice my life to live half American?" "Will things be better in the next generation for the peace to follow?" "Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life?" "Is the kind of America I know worth defending?" "Will America be a true and pure democracy after this war?" "Will Colored suffer still the indignities that have been so heaped upon them in the past?"