

# AMERICANS

## AND THE HOLOCAUST

**TEACHER GUIDE**  
EXPLORING THE  
ONLINE EXHIBITION

UNITED STATES  
HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
MUSEUM

WILLIAM LEVINE FAMILY INSTITUTE  
FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

[www.ushmm.org/americans](http://www.ushmm.org/americans)

## EXPLORING THE ONLINE EXHIBITION

### OVERVIEW

By exploring the Americans and the Holocaust online exhibition, students will examine the motives, pressures, and fears that shaped American attitudes and responses to the threats of Nazism and the Holocaust during the 1930s and 1940s. Students will learn about actions taken at all levels of society—by the government, the media, other organizations, and individual citizens—and how opportunities for action changed over time. This lesson promotes reflection and critical thinking about various factors that shaped attitudes and actions during that time and the factors that influence us today.

#### This lesson explores the following questions:

- What did the US government and the American people know about the threats posed by Nazi Germany, and when?
- How did events in Europe spur debates about America's role in the world?
- What actions were taken in response to events in Europe by Americans at all levels and what obstacles did they face?

#### This lesson examines four time periods:

##### 1) 1933–1937

Americans had access to a significant amount of information about the threat of Nazism during the 1930s, but preoccupation with the catastrophic crisis of the Great Depression and commitment to neutrality prevented any coordinated or sustained response by the US government or concerned individuals. [ushmm.org/americans/1933](http://ushmm.org/americans/1933)

##### 2) 1938–1940

As the refugee crisis in Europe began and intensified, the US government tightened already restrictive immigration laws. Still, some Americans managed to assist refugees. The United States did not have a refugee policy at this time, only an immigration policy. [ushmm.org/americans/1938](http://ushmm.org/americans/1938)

##### 3) 1939–1941

With Europe at war, Americans prioritized national security and staying out of the war, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt steered the nation toward intervention. [ushmm.org/americans/world-war-ii](http://ushmm.org/americans/world-war-ii)

##### 3) 1942–1945

Americans went to war to defeat Nazism and preserve democracy. The US government focused the nation's resources on victory rather than refugee aid, even after learning about the Nazi plan to murder the Jews of Europe. [ushmm.org/americans/1942](http://ushmm.org/americans/1942)

#### Key Questions Explored:

- What information was available to Americans?
- What factors shaped American debates about how to respond?
- What actions did Americans take?

#### Time

1–2 class periods

Cover photo: A newly freed prisoner of the Buchenwald concentration camp made this flag and gave it to Sergeant Donald Hall in 1945. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum collection, gift of the family of Donald J. Hall*

## 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, the political climate, and racial intolerance—changed over time and 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 and in spite 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

- Students will work in groups to explore content in the online exhibition [ushmm.org/americans](http://ushmm.org/americans). You may wish to pre-select groups.
- Print graphic organizers for distribution to groups.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- Access to museum content online: [ushmm.org/americans](http://ushmm.org/americans)
- A minimum of four computer terminals/laptops (one per group)
- A computer with projector and audio for teacher to introduce students to the exhibition website (optional)
- Graphic organizer
- Student presentation slideshow template (optional)

## PROCEDURE

### Introduction

Explain to students that they will be exploring several key 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 Americans take?

### Exploring the Online Exhibition in Groups

- Divide students into groups to explore the exhibition content. Each group is responsible for research focused on one of four time periods: 1933–1937, 1938–1940, 1939–1941, or 1942–1945 [30 minutes]
- Students use their graphic organizers to research answers to the key questions using information and primary sources from the exhibition. Instruct students to read through their entire assigned section, examining images and watching films, before responding to questions on their graphic organizers
- When they are done exploring, groups will discuss the different artifacts, photographs, and personal stories they examined, and answer the key questions. They prepare to share a summary of their time period with the rest of the class.

## Sharing and Discussion

- Students share their research 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 should share photos, artifacts, and personal stories they discovered in addition to the content they learned, and explain to other students how the evidence they collected shapes their understanding of American responses to the Holocaust.

**Option: Have students prepare a slideshow using images and information from the online exhibition to share with the class.**

[15–20 minutes]

- Either back in small groups or in a whole-class discussion, return to the key questions. Compare and contrast conclusions drawn about each time period. Consider the following additional questions: [10 minutes]
  - How did Americans' fears shape their opinions, attitudes, debates, and, ultimately, their actions? Did these change over time in response to political, economic, and other factors?
  - What challenges confronted Americans who sought to save Jews from Nazi persecution and murder?
  - What approaches did Americans take over this time period to try to save Jews?
  - Did some strategies seem more effective than others? Why?

## Synthesis and Conclusion

How did Americans' perceptions of our role in the world change during this time period? With the outbreak of war and rising awareness of what became known as genocide, how did possibilities for action by Americans change?

[5 minutes] (whole group discussion or written piece for assessment)

## Opportunities for Reflection

Students may reflect on the questions below in writing, using both historical content discovered in the online 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 motivate people to help each other? What conditions make people turn away?
- With so many news stories breaking every day, how can Americans today at all levels remember and act on humanitarian values to confront hatred, preserve human dignity, and prevent genocide?
- This exhibition shows us the impact immigration policy can have 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?
- Throughout this historical time period, Americans debated the role the United States should have in relation to the rest of the world. These debates continue today. What does this exhibition teach us about how America's role in the world, and our opinions on it, change over time?

## 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.

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