

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

**GRADE LEVEL:** Adaptable for grades 9–12

**SUBJECT:** History

**TIME REQUIRED:** Approximately 75-90 minutes (extensions available). The introductory portion of the lesson is estimated to take 15 minutes and the timeline card activity 60-75 minutes, with shortcuts available. The length of time needed for the optional extensions vary, but an estimate of 30-40 minutes per activity is reasonable. Extension activities can be completed in class or as assignments.

**This is a *thematic* lesson that builds on fundamental knowledge and provides in-depth exploration of a topic.**

**This lesson is an extension of the [Timeline Activity](#). It can be completed in conjunction with the Timeline Activity or as a standalone resource.**

## RATIONALE

In the 1930s, the US government and the American people learned about Germany's persecution of German Jews from American diplomats, and from newspapers, newsreels, and the radio. After World War II began, Germany and its collaborators increased their persecution and violence against Jews, ultimately resulting in the murder of six million European Jews in what is now called the Holocaust.

This timeline and lesson plan helps students understand the historical and societal context of American responses to the Holocaust, including the responses of individuals and of the US government. It highlights people and groups who argued for more humanitarian action, and encourages students to consider the motives, pressures, and fears that shaped Americans' reactions to the Holocaust as it was happening.

## OVERVIEW

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What could Americans have known about the Holocaust as it was happening?
- How did Americans respond to the Holocaust as it was happening?
- What factors influenced American responses to the Holocaust?

### EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

**At the end of this lesson, students understand:**

- That Americans had access to some information about the Holocaust as it was happening
- How the US government and the American people responded to information about the Holocaust
- The efforts some Americans made to help European Jews
- Some of the motives, pressures, and fears that influenced how Americans responded to the Holocaust

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

## TEACHER PREPARATION

- Review these *Holocaust Encyclopedia* articles:
  - [The United States and the Holocaust](#)
  - [The United States and the Nazi Threat, 1933-37](#)
  - [The United States and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-41](#)
  - [The United States and the Holocaust, 1942-45](#)
- Prepare [timeline cards](#). Photo captions for the images on the cards are available [here](#).
  - Request Timeline Cards [here](#).
- Optional: Review the [Americans and the Holocaust](#) online exhibition.
- You can utilize the [Frequently Asked Questions About the Holocaust for Educators](#) page to find accurate answers to questions from your students.

## LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

**The lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve the educational outcomes.** Technology and teaching strategies are suggested in the instructional sequence; please use other options if they support the learning needs of your students. Consider utilizing graphic organizers, note-taking strategies, reading choices, and online engagement tools.

Educators may choose to use learner variability modifications specific to this lesson:

- Teachers can provide students with choices as to how they access information throughout lessons, i.e. read print alone, read print with a partner, read along while the teacher reads aloud, etc.
- Define terms that would clarify understanding for students.
- Use online discussion or engagement tools that work best in your classroom, such as Padlet.
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* articles are available in various languages; refer to the word “Language” and select the Globe icon available on the left-hand side of the article.
- Closed captions are provided for videos.
- Provide additional time for students to read and research the timeline cards.
- Create shared digital spaces to assist in team collaboration.
- Cards can be duplicated for student annotation and analysis.

This resource is designed to be flexible. Please feel free to use the cards in the way that best achieves your learning outcomes for your unique students and classroom.

## BEFORE TEACHING

If students are not familiar with the Holocaust, review the definition of the Holocaust and answer any questions before proceeding.

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

## DEFINITION OF THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored, persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945 across Europe and North Africa. The height of the persecution and murder occurred during World War II. By the end of the war in 1945, the Germans and their collaborators had killed nearly two out of every three European Jews.

The Nazis believed that Germans were racially superior. They believed Jews were a threat to the so-called German racial community. While Jews were the primary victims, the Nazis also targeted other groups for persecution and murder. The Nazis claimed that Roma, people with disabilities, some Slavic peoples (especially Poles and Russians), and Black people were biologically inferior.

The regime persecuted other groups because of politics, ideology, or behavior. These groups included Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, gay men, and people the Nazis called "asocials" and "professional criminals."

## PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

- **Time: 15 Minutes**
  - **Activity: Film Clip (2 minutes) with discussion**
  - **Resources: Ability to show the film clip, shared digital workspace (optional)**
1. Explain to students that you will be examining what information Americans in the 1930s and 1940s could have had about the Holocaust as it was happening, and how Americans responded to that information. Ask students to brainstorm how people might have learned what was happening in the world before television and the internet. Create a shared list of suggestions. Answers may include newspapers, the radio, friends and family, films.
  2. Introduce [this film clip](#) by informing students that in the 1930s, even during the Great Depression, going to the movies was a popular form of entertainment. Around two-thirds of Americans went to the movies at least once a week. Before the feature film, instead of trailers for upcoming movies, theatergoers would see newsreels, which were short news reports letting them know what was happening in the world. This newsreel is from a popular series called "The March of Time," and it is from January 1938. The transcript for the film clip is available [here](#).
  3. In pairs, small groups, or as a class, discuss the film clip.

### ASK STUDENTS

- What would people watching this film clip have learned about life in Nazi Germany in 1938? *(That things look normal on the surface, but behind the scenes there is anti-Jewish hatred; that there is a big military, that Hitler is a dictator)*

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

- What does the film say is happening to Jewish people in Germany at this time? (*That they are being persecuted and there are signs for them to keep out*)
- What does the film predict will happen in the future? (*That Germany's military will destroy world peace*)
- Does the film clip surprise you in any way?
- What is the difference between seeing a film of something and reading about it? How might seeing a film clip like this one impact how people respond? Encourage students to consider how they respond to film versus text in their own lives.

If students have been working in pairs or small groups, come back together to share.

## PART TWO: THE AMERICAN RESPONSES TIMELINE ACTIVITY

- **Time:** Flexible, at least 45 minutes
- **Activity:** Timeline placement, directed gallery walk, group work, class discussion
- **Resources:** Timeline cards; method of adhering the cards to a surface; [worksheet](#) for each student or group; shared digital workspace (optional)
- **Skills practiced:** chronological thinking, looking for historical evidence, synthesizing information

Note: If you and your students have completed the foundational Holocaust [Timeline Activity](#) and have those cards on the wall of your classroom, you can complete this activity as described. Simply add the new cards to the wall, and replace any duplicate event cards from the activity with the same event cards from the American Responses extension pack (which have more information about American responses to that event). Have students focus only on the yellow cards from this pack to complete this activity.

1. Distribute the [American Responses](#) timeline cards to students (if you have extras, give some students two cards). **Do not distribute the poll cards or the profile cards, which are used for optional activities in Part Three.** Let students take a few minutes to read their cards before having them place the cards on the timeline corresponding to the proper “year” card. Point out that the year cards are colored, and that the cards where the numbers are in blue are during World War II and orange are before and after the war.
2. Ask a few students to adjust the cards so they are in chronological order within the years. Meanwhile, ask students to react to what they had read on their cards.

### ASK STUDENTS

- What event was described?

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

- Did the card say anything about the way Americans reacted to that event?
- What questions do they have?

3. Once the cards are arranged and your discussion has reached a natural conclusion, split students into groups. Assign each group one of the following categories:

1. Immigration and Refugees
2. American Racism and Discrimination
3. President Roosevelt and the US Government
4. Press Coverage
5. World War II
6. Pressure to Help European Jews

If you have particular thematic goals that relate to the cards but are not included here, feel free to assign your own categories in order to achieve your curricular outcomes.

Note: This can also be an individual assignment.

4. Give one [worksheet](#) to each group. Have the groups do a gallery walk of the cards, identifying which event cards they feel fit the theme they were assigned. Using their worksheet, have students list the events. There are no wrong answers if the students make a compelling argument.
5. Once students have completed the gallery walk and created their lists, have students work in their groups to discuss and summarize what they learned about their theme into a paragraph. This paragraph should highlight at least one event and an American response to that event.
6. When the groups have finished, have a representative from each group read their paragraph to the class. If you have access to shared digital workspaces or classroom wall space, consider having students post their paragraphs and allow the other groups to add questions or observations. Discuss any additional themes that students notice after all the paragraphs have been shared.

Note: Instead of a paragraph in steps 5-6, groups could use a digital workspace to create shared word clouds. This is a good option if you are running low on time or would like more time for step 7.

7. Using a whiteboard or shared virtual space, post the following questions:

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

## ASK STUDENTS

- What could Americans have known about the Holocaust as it was happening? (*That the Nazis were passing anti-Jewish laws and over the 1930s, violence against Jews grew. After 1942, Americans could read that the Nazis had a plan to murder all the Jews in Europe.*)
- How did Americans respond to the Holocaust as it was happening? (*There were protests and rallies in the early 1930s, but later, most people didn't want Jewish refugees to come. In 1944, the Roosevelt administration began a policy of rescue, but mass murder was already happening by then.*)
- What factors influenced American responses to the Holocaust? (*Americans were influenced by the Great Depression, by isolationism, and by racism and antisemitism. Many were sympathetic to Jews but still didn't want more immigrants, especially if they were Jewish.*)

8. Create a class paragraph summarizing what students have learned about American responses to the Holocaust. Make sure it addresses the posted questions. Task each group with making sure the class paragraph includes a reference to their theme and is accurate according to the cards they saw and the paragraph they wrote (or the word cloud they created). If you are teaching a history class, this is an opportunity to discuss how historians work to summarize large amounts of information while attempting to maintain accuracy.

## PART THREE: OPTIONAL EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### ACTIVITY 1: HISTORY UNFOLDED AND AMERICAN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE HOLOCAUST

- Time: Flexible, 30-45 minutes
- Activity: Newspaper analysis
- Resources: Internet access (as a class, group, or individual); [information sheet](#); [article analysis worksheet](#) for each student/group
- Skills practiced: searching in research database, reading and analyzing primary sources

This activity works best if the class has access to the internet. It can be completed in small groups or as a class. Familiarize yourself with the [History Unfolded: US Newspapers and the Holocaust](#) database before you begin. You can also pre-select an article and complete this activity as a class, with the article projected or printed for students.

1. Inform students that you will be looking at original newspaper articles that were published about the Holocaust as it was happening. Share the "[How Americans Got Their News](#)" explainer PDF and allow students to review it in pairs or as a class. Answer any questions they may have.

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

2. Share [the History Unfolded website](#) and demonstrate how to locate an article from your state. (From the homepage, hit the “Search Newspaper Articles” button. On the search page, hit “Advanced Search.” Scroll down, and under “Newspaper and Research Location” choose your state (and your city/town if desired/possible), then scroll back up and hit “search.” Feel free to put a word in the search box, but if you leave it blank, you will see all articles from your state.) On the results page, check the “Viewable on newspapers.com” box under “Access” on the left side of the screen to ensure that your results only include full-text articles.
3. Choose an article to show to the class. Read the headline and the first paragraph together.
4. Provide students with this [article analysis worksheet](#). As individuals, in pairs, or small groups, have students locate an article from their state that corresponds to one of the cards on the timeline. They can limit their search results to particular “events” using the “Historical Events” filter.

Note: Not all events on the timeline are included in the *History Unfolded* database. There is at least one viewable article from every state for “Nazis Boycott Jewish Businesses” [April 1, 1933]; Anti-Jewish Riots Convulse German Reich (Kristallnacht) [November 9-10, 1938]; and “Nazi Plan to Kill All Jews Confirmed” [November 24, 1942] You may wish to direct students to these events.

5. When the students have completed their worksheets, ask students to discuss the articles they found.

## ASK STUDENTS

- What information was included in your article that connected to the event on the timeline card?
- Did the article contain information that contradicted or confirmed the information on the card?
- Does the article include additional details?
- How is the article written? Is it factual, or is there an opinion?
- How do you think you would have responded to reading this information?

## ACTIVITY 2: PUBLIC OPINION POLLING IN THE UNITED STATES

- **Time:** Flexible, 30-45 minutes
  - **Activity:** Timeline placement, gallery walk, class discussion
  - **Resources:** Polling cards; method of adhering the cards to a surface
  - **Skills practiced:** looking for historical evidence, drawing conclusions from evidence
1. Distribute the five polling cards from the pack to students. Have students read the date, question, and poll results aloud before placing the poll card on the wall in the proper chronological spot. Project an image of the card to the entire class as it is read aloud.

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

2. Assign one of the five polling questions to each student in the class (either by splitting the class into five groups or counting off). Have them do a gallery walk focused on the historical context of their assigned polling question. Ask them to look for answers to the following questions:

## ASK STUDENTS

- What was happening in Europe and in the United States in the years, months, weeks, and days prior to this poll?
  - What evidence can you find on the timeline cards that help you understand why Americans may have responded the way that they did?
3. As a class, review what your students discovered on the timeline cards. Highlight any themes that emerge from their discussion.
  4. Call students' attention to the fact that two of the polling questions, from November 1938, are from the same poll, and the same people answered both questions.

## ASK STUDENTS

- What evidence did you see that helps explain the results of the two public opinion polls in November 1938? (*The Great Depression is still happening, and people seem to be against even refugee children coming to the United States; There is a lot of racism and antisemitism in America in the 1930s.*)
- What factors might have made Americans express sympathy but be unwilling to take action to help Jewish refugees? (*Americans might have been afraid that Jewish immigrants would take jobs or thought immigrants might make the United States more likely to get involved in a war in Europe. They might specifically not want Jewish refugees to come. Many might have been sorry it is happening but not want anything to change.*)

5. Ask students to consider the role of public opinion in the United States. When should politicians follow public opinion and when should they try to influence public opinion for a particular outcome?

Optional assignment: Have students look for a recent public opinion poll, and write a paragraph explaining what factors they feel affected the way Americans responded to the polling question.

## ACTIVITY 3: BEHIND EVERY NAME: STORIES FROM THE HOLOCAUST

- **Time: Flexible, 30-45 minutes**



# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

- Activity: Short film (5-7 minutes) and discussion
- Resources: Ability to show the film(s), [profile cards](#); method of adhering the cards to a surface; [student handout](#) (optional)
- Skills practiced: film comprehension, looking for historical evidence

Pre-watch the short animated films that are part of the [Behind Every Name: Stories from the Holocaust](#) series and decide which stories you would like to include in this activity. The “American Responses” timeline pack includes profile cards that correspond to each film, with the Alfred Berg card corresponding to “Eleanor and Gilbert: A Couple’s Mission.” This activity is drawn from the USHMM’s [lesson plan](#) related to *Behind Every Name*. The full lesson plan includes an extension that connects the films to artifacts in the Museum’s collection. Note that the animated films and lesson plan are also [fully available in Spanish](#).

1. Begin with an introductory question about the significance of individual stories in understanding history. Ask the students:

## ASK STUDENTS

- Why is it important to highlight individual experiences during the Holocaust? (*Helps us understand the history; helps us know what it was like for a person to go through something; more details; easier to understand from one person*)
2. Next, either split the class into groups to watch different animations, or watch the animation you’ve selected as a class. Distribute copies of the profile card(s) that relate to the film(s) the class/group is watching.
    - [Gretel: An Olympian’s Dream](#) (5:48)
      - Jewish athlete who was not allowed to participate in the 1936 Olympics
    - [Franz: A Professor’s Plea](#) (5:18)
      - Jewish professor who wrote letters to strangers asking for help escaping Nazi oppression
    - [Eleanor & Gilbert: A Couple’s Mission](#) (5:48)
      - A Jewish-American couple who traveled to Vienna to rescue 50 Jewish children
    - [Marianne & Jane: A Pen Pal’s Story](#) (4:42)
      - Two teenage penpals whose friendship had life-saving consequences
    - [Tony: A Soldier’s Journey](#) (6:51)
      - US Army medic who kept a secret diary to honor his fellow soldiers and keep their memory alive
  3. Following the video, students will answer the following questions via class discussion or [optional student handout](#):

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

## ASK STUDENTS

- What challenges did the individual(s) face?
- Were they able to overcome these challenges? If so, how? If not, why not?
- What did you learn about the Holocaust from the story?
- What role did Americans play in the story?
- What surprised you in the story?
- What part of their story would you like to know more about?

4. Place the profile cards related to the films the class/group(s) watched on the timeline. They should place the cards next to the year that is in bold font in the text of the card.
5. Based on what they've read and watched:

## ASK STUDENTS

- What historical events affected the experiences of the individual whose story you learned?
- Why is it important to look at historical context while examining individual stories? (*Can understand decisions and behavior; can sympathize with what is happening; makes a person's story make sense*)
- Return to the original question: Why is it important to highlight individual experiences during the Holocaust?

## ACTIVITY 4: EXPERIENCING HISTORY: HOLOCAUST SOURCES IN CONTEXT

- **Time:** Flexible, 30-45 minutes
- **Activity:** Advanced primary source analysis
- **Resources:** Internet access (as a class, group, or individual); [worksheet](#) for each student/group
- **Skills practiced:** primary source analysis, reading comprehension

Familiarize yourself with the [Experiencing History: Holocaust Sources in Context](#) website before you begin. You can also pre-select a source and complete this activity as a class, with the source projected or provided for students. This activity is particularly good if your class is practicing document-based inquiries (DBIs).

1. Inform students that you will be looking at primary sources from the time period of the Holocaust. These sources were all created by Americans. Assign students one of the following primary sources (either by splitting students into groups and giving each a different source, or providing each student with the source you've selected as best fitting your curricular goals).

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

- ["Can America Afford to Condemn Hitler for his Racist Policies?"](#) (October 1933)
  - [Film of Jewish Boycott in Austria](#) (March 1938)
  - [Maurice Kinler to President Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) (July 1943)
2. Ask students to read the background information that corresponds to their source, then watch or read the primary source. Using the [Analyzing Primary Sources](#) worksheet, answer questions about the source.
  3. When the class has gathered back together, invite students to share what they read or saw.

## ASK STUDENTS

- What did you learn from looking at this primary source?
- Is the creator of the source making an argument about how the United States should respond to the Holocaust? If so, what argument are they making?
- What surprised you about the primary source?
- How do you think people in the 1930s or 1940s who read or saw this source responded to it?

## ACTIVITY 5: WORLD WAR II AND THE HOLOCAUST

- **Time:** Flexible, 20-30 minutes
- **Activity:** Short film (5 minutes) and discussion
- **Resources:** Ability to show the film
- **Skills practiced:** film comprehension, looking for historical evidence

1. Begin a class discussion. Provide students with the opportunity to review the timeline cards if necessary.

## ASK STUDENTS

- Based on the information on the timeline, how did World War II affect Americans' responses to the Holocaust? Did the war make aiding Jewish refugees easier or more difficult? (*World War II made aiding Jewish refugees more difficult because American officials had to leave. People got caught up in a dangerous war; the Nazis imprisoned people who tried to help Jews.*)
- How did World War II impact European Jews' ability to immigrate to the United States? (*World War II made it harder to immigrate to the United States. American embassies closed so people couldn't get immigration visas.*)
- What factors in the US seemed to limit a more active US response? (*People didn't want to get involved in a war. Many Americans had their own antisemitic and racist prejudices. Most people didn't want more immigrants to come.*)

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

2. Watch [“Could the Allies Have Stopped the Killing?”](#) (5 minutes), which looks at the location of the Allied armies and the location of the killing centers during the Holocaust.

## ASK STUDENTS

- What did you notice while watching the film?
- How did World War II affect Germany’s ability to carry out the Holocaust? (*World War II made it easier for Germany to carry out the Holocaust at first. The Germans put the killing centers in German-occupied Poland, far away from neutral or Allied territory. It took a long time for the Allies to defeat Germany.*)
- How did World War II affect the ability of the Allied nations to respond? (*World War II made it difficult for the Allies to respond. Most Jewish communities—and the concentration camps and killing centers—were far away from the Allies and Allied territory. Most Jews were trapped.*)
- When would action by the United States and the other Allied nations have had the most impact? (*Action by the United States and other Allied nations would have had the most impact before the war—and mass murder—began, when people could still escape Europe. The United States could have done more to protest what the Nazis were doing, and could have allowed more Jewish refugees to come to the country.*)

## ASSESSMENT:

Students choose a timeline card and create a work (for example, a collage, a letter to the editor, or a social media-style explainer) to explain the event to other students their age, including how Americans responded to the event. They can utilize the [Americans and the Holocaust](#) online exhibition and the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#) for additional information for their projects. Encourage students to choose cards that are related to the Holocaust.

Students should then prepare a brief reflection, either written or recorded, explaining why they chose this card and what factors they feel influenced how Americans responded to this event as it was happening.

## OPTIONAL ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

- Class participation
- Group/individual work
- Inclusion of information found on the timeline cards in their explainer
- Inclusion of additional information found in the online exhibition or Holocaust Encyclopedia in their explainer
- Accuracy of student information (based on information found on the timeline card/Holocaust Encyclopedia)

# LESSON: American Responses to the Holocaust: Timeline Extension

- Quality of brief reflection (does student include all facets of assignment, is reflection thoughtful, does student show understanding and analysis)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Americans and the Holocaust](#) online exhibition
- [Additional lesson plans](#) related to American responses to the Holocaust
- [Additional lesson plans](#) related to [History Unfolded](#)
- [Lesson plans, film clips, and resources](#) related to *The U.S. and the Holocaust* documentary (PBS, 2022), directed by Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and Sarah Botstein