

Lesson One: The Refugee Crisis and 1930s America

Unit Essential Question:

- In times of crisis, what does it take to move from knowledge to action?

Lesson Title:

The Refugee Crisis and 1930s America

Guiding Question:

- How did multiple political, social, and economic factors contribute to Americans' responses to Nazi persecution of European Jews and the refugee crisis of 1938–1941?

Learning Objectives:

- Through primary and multimedia sources, students will be introduced to the multiple factors that limited Americans' will and ability to respond to the Jewish refugee crisis of 1938–1941, including the Great Depression, isolationism, xenophobia, and antisemitism.
- Students will understand that Americans' sympathy for the plight of Jewish refugees was not matched by support for actions on their behalf, and they will begin to explore the reasons for this gap.

Overview:

When learning about the refugee crisis preceding and during the early years of World War II, students frequently wonder why Americans did not take more concerted action to help Europe's Jews. Rather than attempting to provide a simple answer to this complex question, this lesson introduces students to multiple factors that influenced Americans' will and ability to respond to the Jewish refugee crisis. In particular, students will examine the significant impact of Kristallnacht, which intensified the terror faced by Jewish refugees and strained the limits of the existing American immigration quota system. Students will analyze a number of primary and secondary sources in order to construct a more nuanced understanding of the societal and institutional challenges that affected American perceptions and actions. In the next two lessons of this series, students will apply their understanding of the broader historical context of the 1930s to specific case studies that deal with the debate surrounding child refugees and the experiences of Jewish refugees and American rescuers.

Context:

The Refugee Crisis

In the years leading up to America's direct involvement in World War II, a significant number of European Jews wished to emigrate to America but were unable to do so for various reasons. They faced financial, governmental, and societal challenges. Without outside assistance, they would remain trapped in Europe, facing the growing threat of Nazism.

Germany's annexation of Austria (the *Anschluss*) in March 1938 brought approximately 200,000 additional Jews under Nazi rule. President Roosevelt called for an international conference on the refugee crisis. Delegates from 32 countries gathered in Evian, France, in July 1938, but most countries refused to change their laws to assist Jewish refugees. In mid-1938, nearly 140,000 Germans and Austrians, most of whom were Jews, had applied for US visas. Within a year, that number had increased to more than 300,000, creating an 11-year waiting list.

It was very difficult to immigrate to the United States. In 1924, the US Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act in order to set limits on the maximum number of immigrant visas that could be issued per year to people born in each country. These quotas were designed to limit the immigration of people considered “racially undesirable,” including southern and eastern European Jews. After 1938, only 27,370 people born in Germany and Austria could be granted visas to immigrate to the United States each year. In most years, the US government issued far fewer visas than the maximum allowed.

The US government made no exceptions for refugees escaping persecution beyond exempting them from having to take a literacy test, and it did not adjust the immigration laws in the 1930s or 1940s. The waiting lists for US immigrant visas grew as hundreds of thousands of Jews attempted to flee Europe.

Kristallnacht

In the evening and early morning of November 9–10, 1938, Nazi party leaders unleashed a wave of antisemitic violence across Germany and its newly annexed territories, an event known as [Kristallnacht](#). Storm troopers (SA) and Hitler Youth members burned hundreds of synagogues and ransacked thousands of Jewish-owned businesses, and the German police arrested nearly 30,000 Jewish men and boys, sending them to concentration camps. Though German newspapers reported that the violence had been spontaneous—a public retaliation in response to the assassination of a minor German diplomat in Paris by a Jewish teenager—the American diplomatic corps in Berlin immediately reported to colleagues in Washington, DC, that the attacks were obviously part of a “prearranged plan.”

In the United States, the Kristallnacht attacks were front-page news nationwide for several weeks. At his November 15 press conference, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said that the attack had “deeply shocked” the American public and announced that he was ordering the US ambassador in Germany to return home. The United States was the only nation to take this diplomatic action, and it would not have an ambassador in Germany again until after World War II ended in 1945. Yet Roosevelt did not ask the US Congress to reconsider the quota system that limited immigration. Labor Secretary Frances Perkins did persuade him to allow approximately 12,000 Germans—most of whom were Jews—then in the United States on temporary visitors’ visas to remain in the country indefinitely. President Roosevelt told reporters, “I cannot, in any decent humanity, throw them out.”

The refugee crisis intensified after Kristallnacht. Between 1939 and 1941, more than 300,000 Germans—mostly Jews—remained on the waiting list for immigration visas to the United States. For the first time during the period of Nazi rule, the US State Department issued the maximum number of visas legally allowed under the German quota. Other European countries had long waiting lists for US visas as well; the wait for a visa under the small Romanian quota (377), for instance, was 43 years long. The majority of these applicants were Jewish.

The Gap between Sympathy and Action

Americans could read, see, and hear news about Nazi persecution of European Jews and the *events* of World War II in their newspapers, on the radio, and in newsreels. Despite access to this information, public opinion polls from the period show that most Americans wanted to keep Jewish refugees from entering the country. Racism and antisemitism at home, economic hardship, fears of communism and spies, and eventually World War II all competed with the plight of endangered Jews for Americans’ attention. Also, even though Americans learned about atrocities, because of sensationalist propaganda during World War I, many were skeptical of the reports. As a result, Americans debated their country’s role in the world, including whether to admit refugees and, after September 1, 1939, whether to enter World War II.

The answer to both of these questions, from most Americans, was a resounding no. While the United States was only involved in World War I for a short period of time, the whole experience—and especially the perceived failures of the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations—convinced many Americans that staying out of Europe's affairs was the best course of action. The United States was only involved in the final 19 months of the bloody conflict, between April 1917 and November 1918, but the war (and the influenza epidemic that immediately followed) resulted in the deaths of more than 116,000 American soldiers. The country became deeply isolationist. During the late 1930s, 20 years after [World War I](#) ended, 70% of Americans polled believed that American participation in the war had been a mistake.

Notes to Teacher:

1. Addressing Historical Background Information

While this lesson focuses on the Jewish refugee crisis in the US from 1938 to 1941, we recommend that you review key events in Germany's campaign of terror against Jews and expansion throughout Europe, which initiated and intensified the crisis. These include the emergence of the Nuremberg Laws on race, the German annexation of Austria during the Anschluss, the November 1938 pogrom of German Jews referred to as Kristallnacht, the invasion of Poland, and the creation of Jewish ghettos throughout occupied Europe. The following resources from Facing History and Ourselves and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) offer useful starting points.

- Nuremberg Race Laws:
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia Entry: [Nuremberg Race Laws](#)
 - Special Focus Feature: [Nuremberg Race Laws: Defining the Nation](#)
 - Reading: [The Nuremberg Laws](#)
 - Lesson: [Laws and the National Community](#)
- The Anschluss:
 - Bibliography: [Anschluss](#)
 - Reading: [Taking Austria](#)
- Kristallnacht:
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia Entry: [Kristallnacht](#)
 - Bibliography: [Kristallnacht](#)
 - Timeline: [Kristallnacht](#)
 - Lesson: [Kristallnacht](#)
 - Online Exhibition: [Kristallnacht](#)
- The Invasion of Poland:
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia Entry: [Invasion of Poland, Fall 1939](#)
 - Lesson: [Race and Space](#)
- Jewish Ghettos:
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia Entry: [Ghettos](#)
- The Refugee Crisis:
 - Webpage: [How Many Refugees Came to the United States from 1933–1945?](#)

2. Navigating Race and Racism

This lesson (especially the reading [The “Immigration Problem”](#)) includes issues of race and racism, which are often difficult subjects for teachers and students to navigate. For this reason, you may want to establish (or review) a [class contract](#) and agreed-upon norms of classroom discussion at the beginning of this lesson. You may also want to explore the lesson [Preparing Students for Difficult Conversations](#) (specifically Activities 2 and 3) for additional strategies and guidance. That the meaning of race is socially, rather than scientifically, constructed is a new and complex idea for many students and adults that can challenge long-held assumptions. Therefore, we recommend providing opportunities for students to process, reflect on, and ask questions about what they’ve learned in this lesson. The [Exit Cards](#) teaching strategy is one way to achieve this, but you could also use the [3-2-1](#) strategy to elicit reflections and feedback from students.

3. Clarifying the Newspaper Reporting on Kristallnacht in Activity 2, Station 5

Some students might be confused by the language from stations 5 and 6. These documents contain phrases from signs protesting the Nazi government, as well as American newspaper headlines, with such language as “murder is not government” and references to “eradicating” and “wiping out” Jews. Students may think this refers to the systematic murder of Jews during the Holocaust. It is therefore important to clarify that these events took place before the formulation of the “Final Solution” and before Americans had knowledge of the extent of the mass murder and atrocities that would later occur. The question of what Americans knew and when is central to this history and is important to establish with students as they wrestle with questions of historical responsibility that surface throughout the unit.

4. Preparing for Station Work

To prepare for the station activity on Day 2, we recommend that you set up desk groups or tables in advance. Each station will focus on one of three themes that support the lesson. In order to keep group size manageable (we recommend four to five students per group), you may need to create multiple stations for each reading. The goal is for each group to have the opportunity to work with each of the four readings.

5. Abbreviating the Lesson

This lesson is intended to be taught within a 50-minute class period. If you would like to shorten the lesson, consider asking students to complete their reflections on the Dorothy Thompson quote in the final activity as a homework assignment in addition to reading “Miss American” (details below).

6. Assigning Homework for the Next Lesson

At the end of the lesson on Day 1, pass out copies of the transcript of the radio play “Miss American,” [\[link to audio\]](#) which you can find immediately below the audio player. Ask students to read and annotate the script for homework. They should also answer the following questions:

- Who are the characters/people involved?
- What is going on? What is the basic storyline?
- What is the setting? Time period? Physical location?
- What is the point of view? Whose story is this?
- What is the theme/mood?

7. Essential Vocabulary

The following are key vocabulary terms used in this lesson:

- a. Quota
- b. Visa
- c. Refugee
- d. Pogrom
- e. Public Charge

Add these words to your [Word Wall](#), if you are using one for this unit, and provide necessary supports to help students learn these words as you teach the lesson.

Materials:

- **Video:** [In 1933 . . .](#)
- **Video:** [American Newsreels](#)
- **Reading:** [The “Immigration Problem”](#)
- **Handout:** [Station 1: Polling Data / Roosevelt’s Response](#)
- **Handout:** [Station 2: Responses to Kristallnacht](#)
- **Handout:** [Station 3: The Quota System](#)

Teaching Strategies:

- [Wraparound](#)
- [Identity Charts](#)
- [Read Aloud](#)
- [Stations](#)

Activities:

1. Reflect on the Obstacles to Taking Action

- To open the lesson, give students a few minutes to reflect privately in their journals on the following prompt:

Write about a time when you knew something was wrong but were unable or unwilling to respond. What factors got in the way of you taking action?
- While students may not wish to share their responses in full, you might use the [Wraparound](#) strategy to provide each student with the opportunity to name the factor that got in the way of taking action. For instance, they might say “peer pressure” or “didn’t know what to do.”

2. Establish Historical Context for the United States during the 1930s

- Explain to students that in this lesson they will learn about the refugee crisis created by the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, and especially about the response to the crisis by Americans.
- At the beginning of this lesson, students may or may not know much about America during the 1930s. To access and activate students’ prior knowledge about the period, use the [identity chart](#) format to collect ideas and information about what the United States was like in the 1930s. Create a single chart as a class that can be posted in the classroom for reference throughout the unit.
- Students should add words or phrases that come to mind that they think describe the United States during the 1930s. These words and phrases might include historical events, laws, names, or other descriptors for the country.

- After students have contributed their initial ideas to the chart, show them one or both of the following short videos to help them add additional items: [In 1933 . . .](#) (1:29) and [American Newsreels](#) (3:22).
- Finally, extend students' thinking further by providing some brief historical background information on American attitudes and policies toward immigration. Pass out copies of the reading [The "Immigration Problem"](#) and [read it aloud](#) with students. As students read, they should be underlining information that helps them add to their understanding of American national identity during this period. Once they're finished reading and underlining information, they should add words or phrases that capture what they learned from the reading to the identity chart for the United States in the 1930s.

3. Explore American Responses to Kristallnacht and the Refugee Crisis

- Next, tell students that they will be investigating in more detail American responses to acts of Nazi aggression that created and intensified a refugee crisis in the United States in the late 1930s. Tell students that some of the sources they will be investigating concern American responses to an important turning point and escalation in the Nazis' campaign of terror against German Jews, an event known as Kristallnacht—the "night of broken glass." Share the following historical background information with students:
 - Nazi Party officials instigated a violent nationwide attack against Jews in Germany and Austria on the night of November 9–10, 1938, an event known as Kristallnacht. Units of the Nazi Party's SA militia and Hitler Youth destroyed hundreds of synagogues and thousands of Jewish-owned shops. Nearly 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps.
 - American newspapers throughout the country covered the Nazi attacks against Jews in banner headlines on their front pages, and articles about the events continued to appear for several weeks.
- Transition into a [Stations](#) strategy activity with three stations, one for each of the handouts below. (Depending on class size, you might create multiple copies of each station.)
 - [Station 1: Polling Data / Roosevelt's Response](#)
 - [Station 2: Responses to Kristallnacht](#)
 - [Station 3: The Quota System](#)
- Divide the class into groups so that students are evenly distributed among the stations at all times. Then begin the activity by assigning each group a station at which to begin. Provide groups with five minutes to read and answer the questions that accompany each reading on a separate sheet of paper before having them rotate to the next station.
- Once the groups have finished visiting all of the stations, have students discuss in their groups the following questions:
 - What was the most surprising thing you learned in this activity about American responses to the Jewish refugee crisis?
 - How do these sources illustrate a gap between American sympathy for Jewish refugees and a willingness to take action on their behalf? Based on what you know about the pressures, fears, and motivations that Americans faced during this period, what are some factors that may have contributed to this gap?
 - How are the pressures, fears, and motivations you noticed from the 1930s similar to or different from the obstacles to taking action that the class named at the beginning of the period?

4. Reflect on a Quote from Journalist Dorothy Thompson

- Close the lesson by asking students to write a journal response to this quote about the refugee crisis from journalist Dorothy Thompson:

It is a fantastic commentary on the inhumanity of our times that for thousands and thousands of people a piece of paper with a stamp on it is the difference between life and death.
- Potential prompts:
 - What did Thompson mean when she used the word “fantastic”? We usually give this word a positive connotation.
 - What about this dilemma did Thompson find most baffling?

Extensions

1. Bring Survivor Testimony into the Classroom

Hearing a survivor’s story through oral history is an extraordinary experience that often changes the way students feel about history and themselves. Students may be especially interested in hearing survivor testimony that describes experiences during Kristallnacht. The following testimonies would work well in conjunction with this lesson:

[Susan Warsinger](#)

[Johanna Gerechter Neumann](#)

[Robert Behr](#)

[Fritz Gluckstein](#)

[Inge Katzenstein and Jill Pauly](#)

[Hedi Pope](#)

[Rabbi Jacob Wiener](#)

[Susan Taube](#)

You may also wish to consult Facing History’s lesson [Using Testimony to Teach](#) for suggestions and strategies for viewing testimony and facilitating purposeful reflection with students.

2. Introduce the Universe of Obligation

The concept of *universe of obligation* provides a useful framework to help students understand the ways that nations define who deserves protection and who does not. Sociologist Helen Fein, who coined the term in her study of genocide, defines “universe of obligation” as the circle of individuals and groups within a society “toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends.” Consider using resources and activities from the lesson [Understanding Universe of Obligation](#) to introduce this concept to your students and help them understand the factors that might lead societies, governments, or individuals to tighten or expand their universes of obligation.