

## **American Jews and the Holocaust**

A Cincinnati Museum Center and Online Lesson

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### **Introduction**

*Exhibit Panel Correlation:* “Prejudice and Response;” “Minority Rights and Majority Rule”

*Ohio Social Studies Standards Correlation:*

History	Grade 9	Point 11
History	Grade 10	Point 11
People in Societies	Grade 10	Point 2

What did the United States government know about the Final Solution? When and how did American Jews find out about Nazi atrocities? Could either the U.S. government or the American Jewish community have done more to help save European Jewry? These are the questions that drive discussions of American Jewry and the Holocaust.

This lesson informs students about the policies of the government and the actions of American Jewry during this period, and in the process invites them to explore the parameters of knowledge and responsibility of the American Jewish community and the American government during the Holocaust.

Before proceeding with this lesson, it is essential that students have a basic understanding of the Holocaust. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum ([www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)) offers a myriad of information and teaching strategies on this topic, including the following definition:

*The Holocaust refers to a specific genocidal event in twentieth century history: the state sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims--6 million were murdered; Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.*

*Themes:*

Antisemitism  
Communal responsibility  
Political activism  
Reliability of news media

*Learning objectives:*

1. Students will learn about policies of the American government and responses of American Jewry to the Holocaust.
2. Students will consider the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organizations and nations when confronted with civil rights violations/genocide
3. Students will examine the sources that we rely on for world, national and local news, as a means of
  - (a) understanding that media reflects societal interests and values, and
  - (b) recognizing an individual's personal responsibility to be informed about world events.

### **Pre-Exhibit Activity:**

#### **A. Film**

--View the *American Experience* video, *America and the Holocaust*, a 90-minute documentary. The video is available through the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County as well as other locations.

Description of film: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/filmmore/description.html>

Discussion Questions: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/tguide/index.html>

**OR**

#### **B. Who knew what? When?**

When did the American press first report on the Final Solution?

When did the United States government learn of the Nazis systematic attempts to destroy European Jewry?

Students should consult the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum website ([www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)) to find answers to the above questions.

From that website, it is also possible to download the Riegner telegram (1942). The telegram is also in the Museum Center exhibit. This telegram was written by Gerhardt Riegner, a representative of the World Jewish Congress in Switzerland. Riegner had received information from a German source regarding a Nazi plan to exterminate European Jewry. Riegner refrained from passing on the information until he could validate the reliability of his source. One week later, satisfied with the reliability of the informant, Riegner requested that the American consulate in Geneva cable this information to America and other Allied governments, and to Rabbi Stephen Wise, president of the World Jewish Congress in New York. However, the United States State Department suppressed Riegner's report, which they judged unsubstantiated. In the months that followed, evidence in support of Riegner's report grew and the information was made available to Rabbi Wise.

Have students download and print the telegram and bring it to class for discussion.

Reconstruct the telegram scenario, being sure to discuss the main figures and organizations —the American Jewish Congress, Rabbi Stephen Wise, the U.S. State Department and Gerhardt Riegner, for example.

Consider the factors motivating each of these organizations/individuals as they made decisions with the information available to them.

### **Exhibit Activity**

*Part I:* American leaders used the information that they had available to them to make what were often excruciatingly difficult decisions regarding the situation of European Jewry. In order to understand the various factors that influenced these decision-makers, students should examine the following exhibit documents twice: first from the perspective of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and then from the perspective of Rabbi Stephen Wise.

Students should hypothesize the reflections and/or feelings of each man in response to these specific questions:

For documents:

#### At the Museum Center:

1. Cover and inside of “The Anti-Nazi Bulletin,” showing map of United States with sites of Bund Activities
2. Stephen Wise speeches of 1934 and 1939 (in video format on endcap of panel and in theater)
3. Trade Unions Congress mass meeting poster

#### Online:

4. *America First* Broadsheets
5. Page from *Friends of Democracy*
6. Inside page from the Anti-Nazi periodical entitled, “The Nazis Pack the Hall...”

FDR: What would the consequences be for American citizens were the United States to become involved in the war against the Nazis? How can/should the leader of a multi-ethnic country manage the needs and desires of different minority groups?

Rabbi Wise: How do you think the Nazi presence in Europe made American Jews feel? How about the Nazi presence in America? Should American Jews organize? What can they do to discourage anti-Semitism here and abroad?

*Part II:* American Jewry has a long tradition of political activism on behalf of world Jewry. In addition, American Jews also have fought historically to defend the civil rights of other American minority groups (American Jews have long realized that by defending the inalienable rights of the oppressed and downtrodden, they simultaneously safeguard their own civil liberties).

Find two examples in the exhibit of instances when Jews organized politically to help those within their global community. Answer the following questions for each example:

1. Describe the event: who were the individuals/organizations involved?
2. Why did American Jews take action?
3. What kind of action did they take?
4. Who were they trying to influence?
5. What was the result?
6. Do you think that the action was successful?
7. What strategies could Rabbi Stephen Wise or FDR have learned from these examples of political activism?

### **Post-Exhibit Activity**

Students will consider America's response to a contemporary civil rights violation: the Sudan.

Students should re-visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website. ([www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)). This time, they should be directed to the Committee on Conscience's Genocide alert for Sudan:

<http://www1.ushmm.org/conscience/alert/darfur/overview/index.php>.

Once they have familiarized themselves with the situation in Sudan, students should proceed with one or both of the following activities:

- A. Go to [www.newseum.org](http://www.newseum.org) and examine the headlines of the day. This website provides the 380 front pages from 41 countries on a daily basis. Students should look at at least two front pages in each region. The Sudan may or may not be featured in that day's headlines, depending on world events. Students can learn as much from its absence as its presence. After reviewing the headlines, students can perform a Google search for "Sudan." At the top of the list that Google returns will be any news stories in the past 24 hours—front page or buried in the middle—that mention the Sudan situation. After examining that day's news coverage, the students should answer the following questions:

1. How is news of trouble in countries where the United States is involved reported differently (in volume or content) than in countries where it is not?

2. What can students infer from the placement of different articles within the paper or on the Web or in they infer from differences in headlines and amount of space allotted to different issues? papers reflect societal values? interests?

5. Was the Sudan mentioned on the front pages? Was the Sudan mentioned in any news source in the past 24 hours? If so, where?

Have students continue to check the same websites over the course of a week and end the lesson with the debate outlined below:

B. Split into two sides for a debate about the role that the United States government should play, if any, in the Sudan situation. One side will argue that it is America's responsibility to have created, presented and brought to the world the views, the other side will argue that it is America's responsibility to have created, presented and brought to the world the views, and heard in the classroom and at the exhibit.