



A girl reads a newspaper at a restaurant in Tower, Minnesota, in August 1937. *Library of Congress*

HOW AMERICANS GOT THEIR NEWS IN THE 1930s AND 1940s

Imagine a time when you had to go to the movie theater to watch the news. What we read, hear, and see on smartphones today took a much different form in the years before and during World War II, when Americans got their news from radio, film newsreels, and printed media—magazines and newspapers. Newspapers were available in every American community, and collections of historical newspapers can now be available in many local and university libraries. That is why the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has chosen newspapers for a citizen history project researching how Americans learned about Nazi persecution and murder of the Jews, now known as the Holocaust.

In the World War II era, Americans could subscribe to a morning newspaper and an evening newspaper. Some newspapers were published every day and some on particular days of the week. Newsstands, which sold local newspapers and national publications, were found throughout cities. While people waited for the bus they didn't check their phones; mobile phones didn't exist. Instead, people read the newspaper.

What did Americans see in their newspapers? The pictures were fewer and only in black and white. Front-page headlines were crafted to sell copies at newsstands. Reporters were known well in their communities. Some newspapers sent their own reporters abroad, but most local newspapers subscribed to wire services like the Associated Press, United Press International, or International News Service, which covered global stories and distributed them for newspapers to print. Thus, Americans around the country read similar versions of news stories published by wire services. In major cities, newspapers such as the *New York Times* gained national reputations for foreign news reported by their own correspondents during World War II.

In addition to news stories written by reporters, most newspapers included a section of opinion articles written by the newspaper's editors, national and local authority figures, and ordinary readers. The editorial and opinion pages were usually inside the newspaper, and often contained a political cartoon as well. Letters to the editor



In September 1943, a baggage clerk loads newspapers onto a bus in Knoxville, Tennessee. They would be left at small towns along the route. *Library of Congress*

were sometimes published, typically near the editorials. If you find letters to the editor related to an event you are researching, it will tell you how a reader reacted to the news—often arguing against or in support of an editorial or opinion piece previously published in the paper.

You may find few who argued for US action in response to the news from Europe. This reflects the social, economic, and political context of the time. In the 1930s and 1940s, Americans were preoccupied with fears related to domestic economic crises, national security, and war—topics that often dominated the headlines. Many Americans—wary from World War I and economic depression—harbored strong isolationist feelings against involvement in European affairs. Some argued that expressing opposition to Nazi

mistreatment of Jews or advocating for a US response would lead to entanglement in international disputes and eventually another global conflict. Similarly, antisemitic attitudes (prejudice against Jews) were strong in the United States at the time, and some Americans supported the Nazis' anti-Jewish policies. Many Americans simply found it very difficult to believe what they were reading about Nazi persecution of Jews.

While historians have extensively researched many major newspapers, gathering data from local newspapers around the country has not been done in this way and on this scale. The research you do will help to answer questions historians have raised about local news reports of worsening Nazi persecution and the Holocaust. We are interested in questions including:

- How was information about Nazi persecution and murder of Jews reported at the local level?
- Did reporters and editors treat stories of the Nazi persecution of Jews as fact or rumor?
- When newspapers ran stories, did they “bury” the news on inside pages of the newspaper or treat them as “headline news”?
- How did editors treat news of what later became known as the Holocaust in comparison to other news about the war or local news that was important to readers’ daily lives?
- To what extent did newspapers use their platform to advocate for action in response to Nazi persecution and murder of the Jews?

Your research and data about your local newspapers will help us answer these questions.

ushmm.org/unfolded