



CONFRONTING THE HOLOCAUST: AMERICAN RESPONSES

The 2014 Days of Remembrance invite us to look back at two seminal events in Holocaust history that raise questions about the responses of the United States to the widespread persecution and mass murder of the Jews of Europe. What can we learn today from American action and inaction in the face of the refugee crisis in the spring of 1939 and the deportation of Hungarian Jews five years later?

Jewish refugees board the MS *St. Louis* in Hamburg, Germany, in May 1939. *Collection of Walter Karliner, Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, New York*



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The United States in the 1930s

As the Nazis increasingly persecuted Germany's Jews in the 1930s, many Jews sought refuge in other countries. In the United States, the Depression's economic hardships intensified antisemitism and xenophobia. The US State Department enforced restrictive immigration laws limiting the issuance of visas, making it difficult for Jews to enter the United States. While Americans participated in rallies opposing Nazi persecution, an overall sentiment of isolationism pervaded American attitudes and policy.

Former New York Governor Alfred E. Smith addresses the crowd at a demonstration held in Madison Square Garden to protest the Nazi persecution of German Jews. March 27, 1933.
National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland

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The Plight of Refugees

In the face of a European refugee crisis caused by increasing anti-Jewish violence, the United States experienced a public challenge to its immigration policies. Over 900 Jewish passengers left Germany aboard the MS *St. Louis* in May 1939 seeking refuge in Cuba. Arriving in Havana harbor, passengers were refused entry because the Cuban government had invalidated their travel papers. Fearing a return to Germany, yet with no place to go, the passengers and the ship waited near the US coast as alternate havens were sought.

Jewish refugees aboard the MS *St. Louis* attempt to communicate with friends and relatives in Cuba, who were permitted to approach the docked vessel in small boats. *National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland*

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US Response to the St. Louis

Despite US newspapers' generally sympathetic portrayal of the passengers' situation, only a few journalists suggested that the refugees be admitted into the United States. The US government refused to admit the passengers until their quota numbers were called. Wanting to aid the passengers, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), took action. Morris Troper, an American lawyer working for the JDC, played an essential role in negotiating with the governments of Belgium, the Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom, which ultimately provided refuge to the passengers.

Mr. and Mrs. Morris Troper (center) pose with Jewish refugees on the deck of the *St. Louis*. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Betty Troper Yaeger*

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Safe Haven?

In 1939, securing safe haven for the *St. Louis* passengers in Europe was deemed a diplomatic success. Subsequent wartime Nazi occupation of western Europe, however, meant that many former passengers once again faced Nazi persecution. Some passengers such as Henry Gallant (above left) managed to survive. Other passengers, such as Ruth Karliner (above right), died in German killing centers or concentration camps. In the end, almost one-third of the *St. Louis* passengers died in the Holocaust.

Henry Goldstein (Gallant) and Ruth Karliner on the deck of the *St. Louis*. *Left photo: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Betty Troper Yaeger. Right photo: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Herbert and Vera Karliner*

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The New York Times

Copyright, 1941, by The New York Times Company.

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, JUNE 19, 1941.

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in Living Cost parallels Last War

Cost of living in the United States and Great Britain is following much the same course in 1941 as it did in the early years of the World War, according to a study made public yesterday by the National Industrial Conference Board.

In the early parts of both wars, the board said, increases were relatively great in the United States and small in the United Kingdom. By July, 1915, British living costs had advanced 25 per cent compared with 21 per cent in the United States. By September, 1940, in the United States, the conflict. In this country, living costs were practically stationary in the first year of the war, whereas they went up 10 per cent in the first year of this

When August, 1939, and May, 1940, the rise in costs here was 4 per cent, as against 7 per cent in the United Kingdom. During the first war costs continued to mount until June, 1916, when they reached a ceiling 10 per cent above the level for 1914.

FOUND GUILTY SHIP SABOTAGE

U. S. RULING CUTS OFF MEANS OF ESCAPE FOR MANY IN REICH

Curb on Refugees Who Might
Be Spies Here to Save Kin
Drastically Interpreted

MANY VISAS TO BE VOIDED

Thousands Who Have Booked
Passage From Lisbon Now
Face Rejection

The new Department of State regulations barring immigration visas to alien refugees who would leave behind close relatives subject to pressure on the part of "certain" governments will cut off the last avenue of escape for hundreds of refugees now waiting for permission to enter the United States, shipping officials said yesterday.

Steamship companies engaged in the passenger trade between New York and Lisbon, the last western outlet through which the European

TURKS AND NAZIS SIGN GERMAN-SOVIET SHOW ALLIES OPEN ATTACK

Strikes in Canada Cost Only Ten Seconds a Day

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.
OTTAWA, June 18—Only ten seconds a day were lost by strikes of all kinds in Canada in the last year and only a quarter of that time in war industries, Labor Minister Norman McLarty said today.

"It is one of our difficulties," he said, "that it is not news that 3,000,000 people go to work every day, but it is news if a hundred fail to do so."

The figures of the last five months, especially, proved conclusively that an enormous majority of those engaged in industry and labor fully realized the importance of the work on which they were engaged and were determined to go on delivering the tools, he declared.

DEFIANCE IN SYRIA

Assault on Old Capital
Follows Refusal to
Yield to Invaders

WAVELL REPORTED IN IRAQ

Heavier Allied Action to Clean
Up Levant Foreshadowed as
French Stiffen Defense

By The Associated Press.
LONDON, Thursday, June 19—The British news agency Reuters reported today from Palestine that Allied troops were attacking Damas-

Reich Ultimatum Reported in

Said to Demand the
Rumania and Acceptance
Is Evacuating W

Special Broadcast to THE NEW YORK TIMES
ANKARA, Turkey, June 18—The city was full of rather convincing reports tonight that a German note of the nature of an ultimatum had already been sent to the Soviet Government and was due to expire very shortly, although wild rumors that hostilities had actually started were discountenanced.

According to information received by diplomats, the Germans are demanding that Russian representatives meet with Rumanian delegates to discuss the question of returning

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US Policy in the 1940s

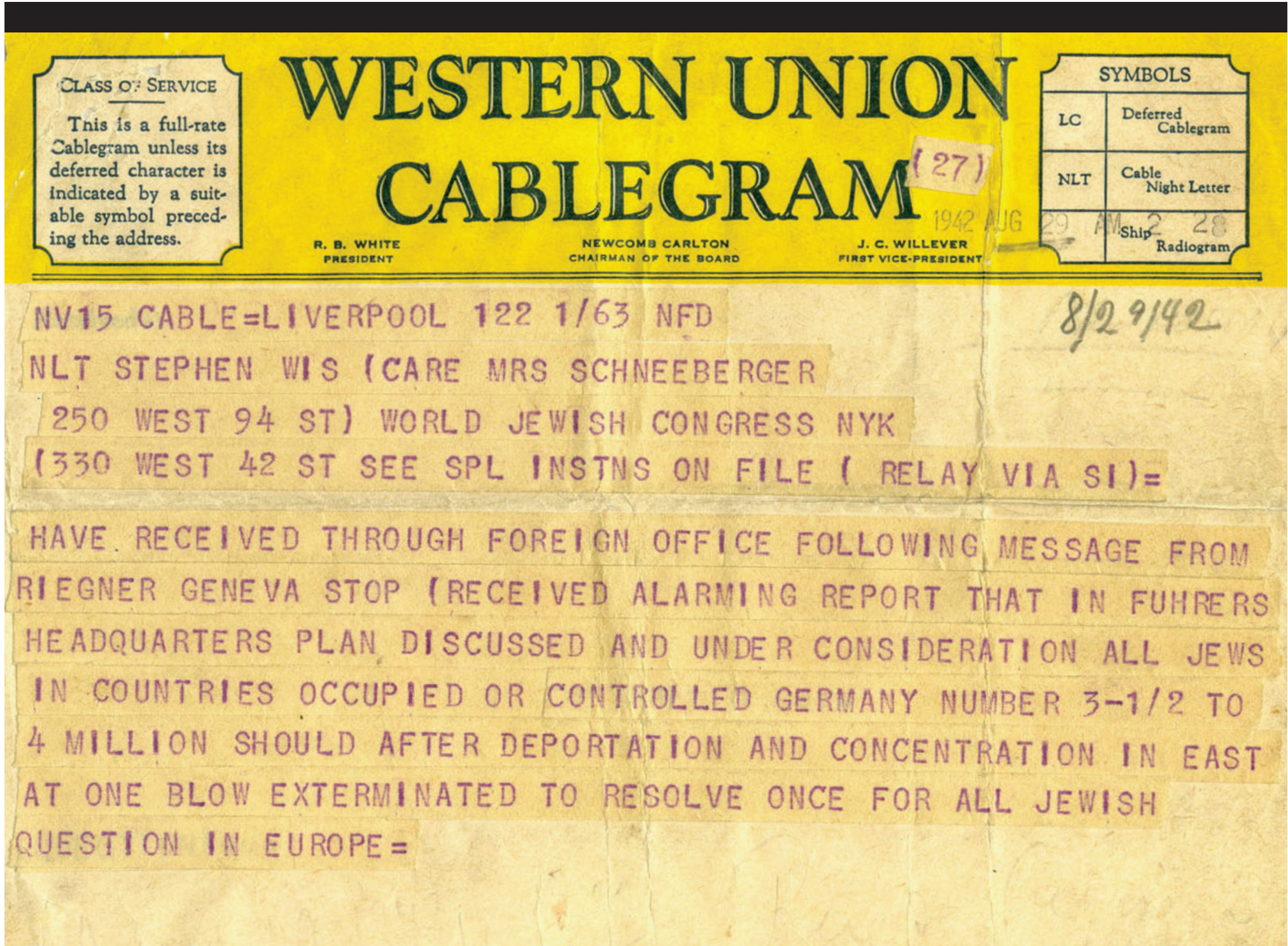
The start of World War II in September 1939 added a new challenge for those seeking refuge. In wartime, US policies became more restrictive. In June 1941, the State Department issued a regulation forbidding the granting of a visa to anyone with relatives in Axis-occupied territories. Once the United States entered the war, the State Department implemented stricter immigration policies out of fear that refugees could be blackmailed into working as enemy agents.

New York Times, June 19, 1941. Page 1.

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News of Nazi Annihilation Policy

In August 1942, the State Department received a copy of a cable sent by the World Jewish Congress’s Gerhart Riegner stating that the Nazis were implementing a policy to annihilate the Jews of Europe. Afraid the cable was “war rumor,” department officials withheld its release. Only in November 1942 did the State Department finally confirm its accuracy and allow the Nazi policy of mass murder to be publicized.. Most Americans accepted the official US policy that only the defeat of Germany could stop the murder of Europe’s Jews.

First page of a two-paged cable from Gerhart Riegner to Rabbi Stephen Wise reporting on the existence of a Nazi plan to exterminate European Jewry. *Courtesy of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio. americanjewisharchives.org*



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Momentum for Action

In 1943, US Treasury Department officials John Pehle and Josiah DuBois had become frustrated with what they saw as limited action by the State Department to rescue Jews. In a report presented to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, they asserted that unless steps were taken, “this government will have to share for all time the responsibility for this extermination.” This effort by the Treasury staff along with public pressure helped prompt President Franklin D. Roosevelt to create the War Refugee Board in January 1944 and appoint Pehle to run it.

John Pehle, executive director of the War Refugee Board. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

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War Refugee Board Created

As executive director of the War Refugee Board, John Pehle used his position of leadership to leverage numerous means to rescue endangered Jews. The board led efforts to get neutral countries to accept refugees; it funded boats to ferry refugees out of Romania; and it established a temporary refuge for some Jews at Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York. The board also financed Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg’s rescue efforts in Hungary.

Newly arrived refugees receive food and drink at a picnic at Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York. *National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland*



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“Late and Little”

In March 1944 Germany occupied Hungary. At German request, the Hungarian authorities deported around 440,000 Jews and worked with Hungarian leaders to deport around 440,000 Jews, primarily to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Although the War Refugee Board is credited with saving as many as 200,000 lives, more than 800,000 Jews were murdered from the time the board was established until the end of the war. The majority of these Jews were from Hungary. As John Pehle, the board’s executive director, later said, “What we did was...late and little.”

Jews from Subcarpathian Rus, then part of Hungary, undergo a selection on the ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Late May 1944. *Yad Vashem Photo Archives*

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The Legacy of Genocide

Fifty years after the deportation of Hungary's Jews, genocide in Rwanda challenged the world's ability to respond. Despite warnings of violence made by Canadian General Roméo Dallaire, the head of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda, the world failed to act and some 800,000 people were murdered within 100 days. President Bill Clinton later reflected: "If we'd gone in sooner, I believe we could have saved at least a third of the lives that were lost....It had an enduring impact on me."

A site in Kigali, Rwanda, where several thousand people were executed. This is one of the few locations where some victims had the honor of individual burial. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*



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Confronting the Holocaust

AMERICAN RESPONSES

What are the warning signs we should look for to help prevent future genocides?

What is our responsibility as a nation or as individuals when confronted with such crimes?

As long as genocide remains a threat, we must continue to ask ourselves about the consequences of action—and of inaction. That is how we strive to fulfill the promise of Never Again.

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