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? Looking back at these two events in Holocaust history raises questions about the responses of the United States to the widespread persecution and mass murder of the Jews of Europe.

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
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
American responses

National Days of Remembrance

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
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.
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
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

TURKS AND NAZIS SIGNS ALLIES OPEN ATTACK

DEFIANCE IN SYRIA

Reich Ultima Reported in

LONDON, Thursday, June 19—The British news agency Reuters reported today from Palestine that Allied troops were attacking Damascus.

NEW YORK, Thursday, June 19, 1941.

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.

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
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
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
In March 1944 Germany occupied Hungary. At German request, the Hungarian authorities deported 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
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
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.