

Memory & Action



An estimated 100,000 people gather outside of Madison Square Garden in New York City to participate in a May 10, 1933, march protesting the Nazi persecution of German Jews. —US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of American Jewish Congress

1933: How Did Americans React?



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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When I tell people I am a historian of American responses to the Holocaust, I hear lots of opinions. These beliefs usually fall into one of two categories:

(1) that Americans knew nothing and did nothing about the Nazi persecution of Jews, or (2) that they knew everything about the persecution, and still did nothing.

These beliefs seem to be rooted in the understandable question of “why.” Millions of Jews and others were murdered, so it is our responsibility to ask how and when the catastrophe could have been mitigated, or prevented altogether. We wish that the United States could have prevented or halted the Holocaust. We would like to think that if Americans had known about the persecution of Jews, or had acted on what they knew, the Holocaust would not have happened. So why didn’t Americans do more? I wish the answers to that question were easy.

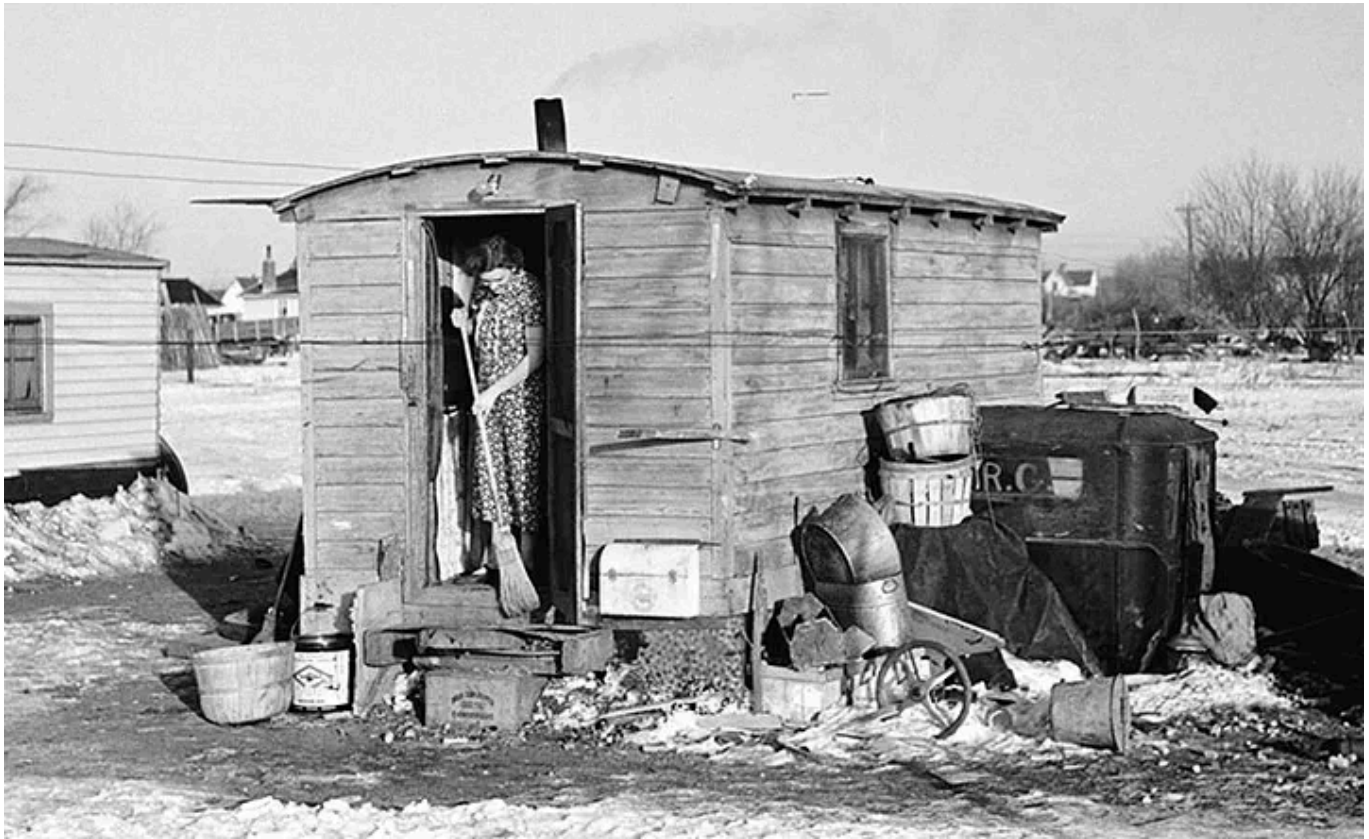
In his recent book, *Why: Explaining the Holocaust*, historian Peter Hayes quotes a German aphorism: “Beware the beginnings.” While the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 and the first mass killings in 1941 were important “beginnings” in the history of the Holocaust, I want to step back and look at 1933. What did Americans do when the Nazis took power and began the persecutions that ultimately led to mass murder?

Fears at Home

On March 4, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt was sworn in as president of the United States, just five weeks after Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Once in power, the Nazi party moved quickly to restrict Jewish life, while in the United States, Roosevelt rallied Americans, promising to rebuild a devastated economy.

Americans in 1933 were deeply afraid. They were afraid of being dragged into international conflicts: In the 1930s, Congress passed neutrality laws

with overwhelming bipartisan support, proclaiming that the United States would remain isolated.



Mrs. Charles Benning sweeps the steps of a “Shantytown” shack in Spencer, Iowa, in 1936. —Russell Lee/Library of Congress

Twenty-five percent of American workers were unemployed. The Great Depression closed banks and wiped out savings. Americans starved on the streets. The land, beset by drought and dust storms, failed farmers. It’s hard for Americans today to grasp the pervasive economic insecurity and fear during the Great Depression.

Many Americans also were afraid of anyone they perceived as being different or foreign, and many considered nonwhites as inferior. Throughout the 1930s, Congress could not pass an anti-lynching bill; Jim Crow laws (and customs) reigned in many parts of the country; and Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American citizens were forcibly deported from California.

Antisemitism rose throughout the decade, and many hotels, colleges, and private clubs restricted or prohibited Jews from visiting, attending, or becoming members.

Voices Raised

In the spring of 1933, next to articles on Roosevelt's first hundred days, the New Deal legislation, and the repeal of prohibition, Americans could read front-page stories about Jews being kicked out of their jobs and beaten on the streets in Germany. Dozens of American newspapers had correspondents based in Germany who sent back vivid descriptions of what they were witnessing under the new Nazi leadership.

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New York City

March 22 1933

Honorable Franklin Roosevelt, President of U.S.A.

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Hon. Sir:

We the undersigned American citizens - residents of N.Y City wish to protest against the Hitler religious persecution movement now going on in Germany - We feel that a note of protest from you will put a stop to this religious intolerance and protect American citizens in Germany.

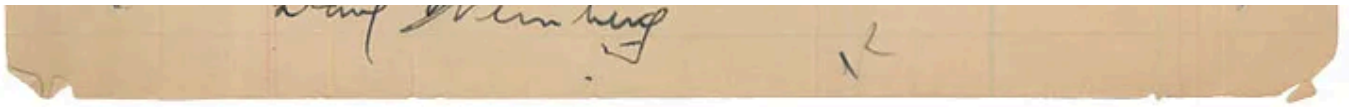
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One of the many petitions sent to President Roosevelt in 1933. —National Archives and Records Administration

Americans read these articles, and despite all of their own problems, many grew concerned. Thousands of Americans attended anti-Nazi marches and rallies throughout the United States, protesting early persecutions, the boycott of Jewish stores, and Nazi book burnings. An American movement to boycott German-made goods and the stores that sold them began and lasted for nearly a decade, mainly in large cities on the east coast. And between March and May 1933, tens of thousands of people — from 29 states and Washington, DC — signed petitions calling on the new Roosevelt administration to protest Nazi persecution of the Jews.

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The petitioners included:

- The International Catholic Truth Society, which wrote that Nazi attacks against “thousands of native born German Jews should arouse the righteous indignation of every lover of humanity and of every believer in the brotherhood of man throughout the world.”
- The citizens of Macon, Georgia, who wrote they “deplore the anti-Jewish atrocities and protest against the whole anti-Semitic movement in

Germany” and, by petitioning, wanted to express “at least in a small way the Christian sentiment of the peoples of this community.”

- Residents of Douglas, Arizona, who handwrote their names and addresses on petition sheets, asking their senator to “raise your voice in Congress to protest against the barbarities of the Hitler regime upon the Jews in Germany. Your active intercession may save the lives and the livelihood of thousands of innocent people.”
- Members of the Orange Merchants Association of Orange, New Jersey, who wrote they “deplore the reported acts of aggression, injustice, and violence towards Jews in Germany.”

I find these petitions, and the hundreds of others I’ve read, incredibly moving. I wish for the authors’ sake, and for the people they were trying to help, that their pleas had been successful. I wish the beginning had also been the end.

But we know what the authors do not: that the US government ultimately would not formally protest Nazi Germany in 1933 — except to protect American citizens, dozens of whom were beaten on German streets, many because they were perceived to be Jewish. Within a few months, news of Nazi persecutions would move from the front page to the inside of newspapers. Most Americans outside of Jewish communities, even many of those who had signed petitions and joined marches, would stop paying close attention. Their worries, over finding jobs and feeding their families, took precedence over concerns about persecution across the sea.

The Questions that Remain

Historians agree on factual explanations why most American protests against Nazism in 1933 died down within a few months, which I’ve partly

given above. Isolationism, economic concerns, racism, and antisemitism all led most Americans to focus on domestic problems rather than international ones. Reflecting the mood and situation of the country, State Department officers interpreted America's restrictive immigration laws even more stringently, leaving the quotas far from filled. Nazi Germany owed American banks billions of dollars, and the Roosevelt administration was unwilling to issue a protest, in part because of the risk that Hitler would cancel his country's debts. Nazi Germany was a sovereign nation, and most Americans did not consider intervention in Germany's treatment of its own citizens the role of the United States.

Yet these historical explanations don't answer the emotional "Why" in the hearts of so many Holocaust survivors and descendants of those who were murdered. What could Americans have done differently, and would it have changed anything?

As the Museum often says: What they did mattered. At least for a brief period of time in 1933, Americans were paying attention and were outraged by the Nazi attacks. Even if we can't point to a direct result from the petitions, the tens of thousands of Americans who wrote, signed, and sent these documents to Washington remind us that the American people did have information about the persecution of the Jews in 1933. They saw the early warning signs — the authoritarian ruler who spread an exclusionary and violent racist ideology — factors we now, with the benefit of hindsight, identify as precursors to genocide. To protest, Americans showed up at rallies and boycotted stores. Hitler, who paid close attention to American press coverage, might have gone further, faster, had he not read about the American people's disapproval. Fewer Jews might have gotten out, and America might have been less prepared to respond militarily.

These petitions, rallies, and boycotts might have mattered a great deal — we'll just never know. And the networks of like-minded Americans that formed during this period would later lead some Americans to raise their voices even louder and take great risks as the Nazi persecution of Jews worsened in Europe. Sadly, too few followed their lead.

Rebecca Erbelding, PhD, has been a lead researcher for the Museum's upcoming special exhibition, Americans and the Nazi Threat, opening in spring 2018. To learn more about the five years of research and planning by Erbelding and her colleagues, attend [an event in your area](#). Discover how the US media covered pivotal events in 1933 at newspapers.ushmm.org.

This article was first published in Fall 2017.

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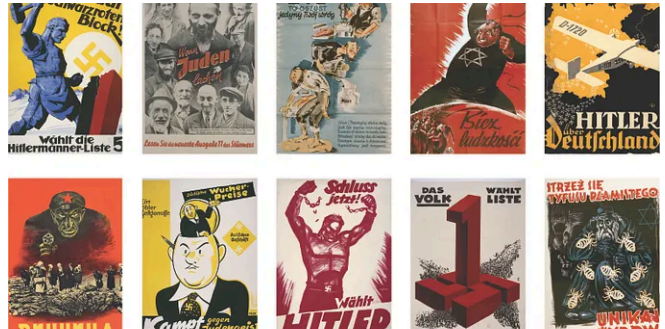
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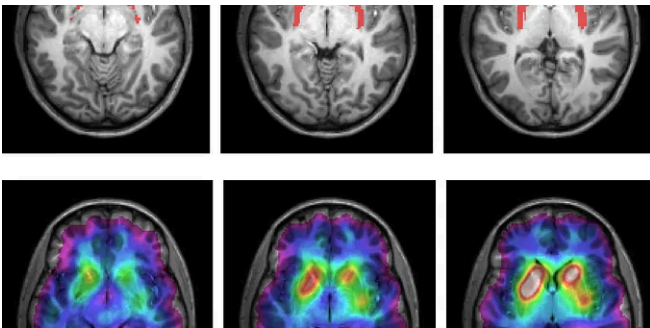
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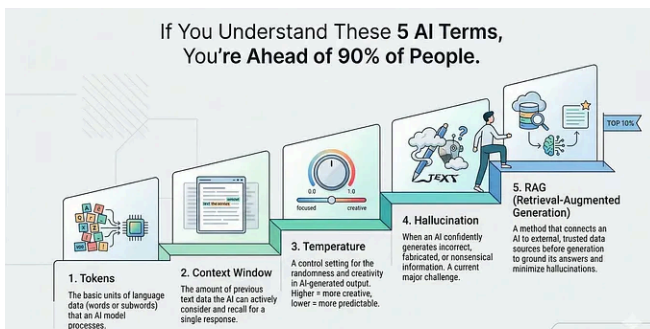


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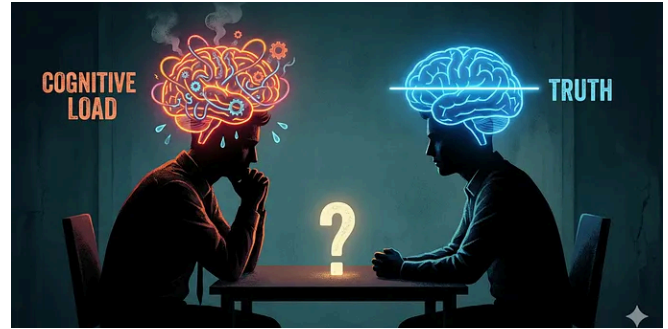
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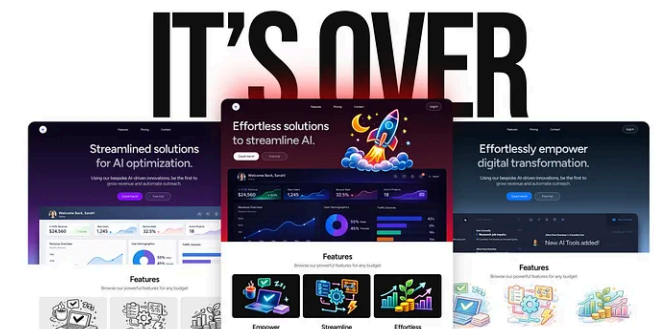




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