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American Public Opinion and the Holocaust

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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Americans rarely agree as overwhelmingly as they did in November 1938. Just two weeks after Nazi Germany coordinated a brutal nationwide attack against Jews within its own borders — an event known as "Kristallnacht" — Gallup asked Americans: "Do you approve or disapprove of the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany?" Nearly everyone who responded — 94 percent — indicated that they disapproved.

Yet, even though nearly all Americans condemned the Nazi regime's terror against Jews in November 1938, that very same week, 71 percent of Americans said "No" when Gallup asked: "Should we allow a larger number of Jewish exiles from Germany to come to the United States to live?" Just 21 percent said "Yes."

Why this yawning gap between disapproval of the Nazi regime's persecutions and a willingness to aid refugees? Gallup polling on these topics during the Nazi era helps answer this question, providing important context for understanding Americans' responses to the threat of Nazism.

Americans' widespread disapproval of the Nazi regime's treatment of Jews could not necessarily be assumed in 1938, given evidence that the United States was not immune from its own xenophobia and discrimination.

"Partly Their Own Fault"

Prejudice against Jews in the United States was evident in a number of ways in the 1930s. According to historian Leonard Dinnerstein, more than 100 new antisemitic organizations were founded in the United States between

1933 and 1941. One of the most influential, Father Charles Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice, spread Nazi propaganda and accused all Jews of being communists. Coughlin broadcast anti-Jewish ideas to millions of radio listeners, asking them to "pledge" with him to "restore America to the Americans."

Further to the fringes, William Dudley Pelley's Silver Legion of America ("Silver Shirts") fashioned themselves after Nazi Storm Troopers ("Brown Shirts"). The German American Bund celebrated Nazism openly, established Hitler Youth-style summer camps in communities across the United States and hoped to see the dawn of fascism in America.

Even if the Silver Shirts and the Bund did not represent the mainstream, Gallup polls showed that many Americans held seemingly prejudicial ideas about Jews. A remarkable survey conducted in April 1938 found that more than half of Americans blamed Europe's Jews for their own treatment at the hands of the Nazis. This poll showed that 54 percent of Americans agreed that "the persecution of Jews in Europe has been partly their own fault," with 11 percent believing it was "entirely" their own fault. Hostility toward refugees was so ingrained that just two months after Kristallnacht, 67 percent of Americans opposed a bill in the US Congress intended to admit child refugees from Germany. The bill never made it to the floor of Congress for a vote.

Sentiments against Refugees

Reluctance to admit refugees most likely resulted in part from the profound economic insecurity that typified the times. During the 1930s, nothing captured Americans' attention more than the devastating Great Depression, and hunger and employment took precedence over concerns about the rise of fascism abroad and its victims.

The Great Depression was in its eighth year when the US economy bottomed out again in 1937, the year before Kristallnacht. Unemployment spiked to 20 percent in 1938, and nearly half of Americans believed the United States had not yet hit the low point of the Depression.

Germans pass by a Jewish-owned business that was destroyed on Kristallnacht, November 10, 1938. — National Archives and Records Administration

The notion that "those refugees" would take "our" jobs prevailed across much of America, even though courageous individuals like Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins tried to convince colleagues in the federal government that immigration would spark economic recovery rather than slow it down. Even as late as the spring of 1939, with war pressures building

in Europe, Americans were more likely to say economic issues were the most important problem facing the United States than they were to mention war.

This economic insecurity no doubt helped to intensify anti-immigrant sentiment that dated back to the 1920s. By the time Americans became aware of the refugee crisis facing Europe's Jews, America's "golden doors" for immigrants had been all but closed for nearly 15 years, ever since the US Congress passed the 1924 National Origins Quota Act.

The immigration process was designed to be exclusionary and difficult. In that regard, it "worked." Most of Europe's Jews who were unable to find haven from Nazism — whether in the United States or elsewhere — did not survive the Holocaust. During the 12 years of Nazi rule, historians estimate that the United States admitted somewhere between 180,000 and 220,000 Jewish refugees — more than any other nation in the world, but far fewer than it could have under existing immigration laws.

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Prevailing sentiment against admitting refugees reflected the United States' consistent desire to remain isolated from world affairs. President Franklin Roosevelt, harkening back to George Washington's 1796 farewell address, promised Americans that the nation would remain "unentangled." That's what Americans wanted to hear. The United States stayed out of conflicts such as the Spanish Civil War, just as Americans hoped it would.

Visitors to the Museum's Americans and the Holocaust exhibition explore documents in an interactive display about the challenges of immigrating to the United States in the years before World War II. —US Holocaust Memorial Museum

Reluctance to Get Involved

Hindsight tells us that preparing for and fighting in World War II lifted the country out of the Depression, but polling reveals much more pessimism about the prospects for the war before the United States entered it. Even in July 1941, as the majority of Americans believed US entrance into the war was inevitable, 77 percent thought the war would be followed by another economic depression.

Americans remained reluctant to go to war against Nazism partly because of the lessons they took away from intervening in World War I, when some 116,000 Americans were killed. Even in 1941, with all of Europe at war and

the United States on the brink of entry, about four in 10 Americans still believed that intervention in World War I had been a mistake.

War in Europe began during the first week of September 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland; in response, both Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. Nearly half (48 percent) of Americans responding to a Gallup poll that week said the United States should not get involved, even if it looked like England and France were losing. Roosevelt took to the airwaves that week either to reinforce or to follow public opinion, declaring that the United States would "remain a neutral nation."

Nine months later, as France and other Western European nations fell to Nazi Germany, 79 percent of Americans in a Gallup poll said if they had the chance, they would vote to stay out of the war, and by the summer of 1941, almost eight out of ten Americans continued to say they did not want the United States to enter the war.

All of this concern about the economy and the desire to avoid getting entangled in world affairs — particularly another European war — almost certainly played a part in Americans' reluctance to favor bringing Jewish refugees into the country.

A final piece of important context: In 1938, it was not yet clear to anyone that Nazi Germany's persecution of Jews within its own borders would lead to the mass murder of Jews throughout all of Europe. The Nazi regime itself still had not devised that plan at Kristallnacht; murder would become Germany's "Final Solution to the Jewish question" in 1941.

Believing the Unimaginable

Even during World War II, as the American public started to realize that the rumors of mass murder in death camps were true, they struggled to grasp the vast scale and scope of the crime. In November 1944, well over five million Jews had been murdered by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Yet just under one-quarter of Americans who answered the poll could believe that more than a million people had been murdered by Germans in concentration camps; 36 percent believed that 100,000 or fewer had been killed.

Only with the benefit of hindsight can we connect dots that many Americans could not have at the time. And yet, the stark contrast of these two November 1938 polls, revealing the troubling gap between disapproval of Nazism and willingness to admit refugees, continues to resonate. These findings not only shine a disturbing light on Americans' responses to atrocities during the Holocaust but also are consistent with polls conducted since. A Gallup poll just after the war still showed solid opposition to allowing European refugees fleeing their war-torn continent to come to the United States, and Gallup polls in the decades since have shown Americans' continuing reluctance to accept refugees from other nations.

The article above was originally published in the Gallup blog Polling Matters on April 23, 2018. It was written by Daniel Greene, curator of the Americans and the Holocaust special exhibition and adjunct professor of history at Northwestern University, and Frank Newport, then Gallup's editor-in-chief.

Polling Interactions

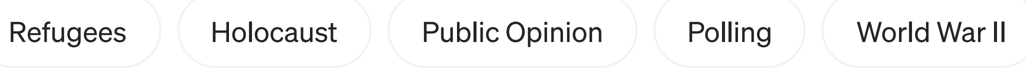
George Gallup revolutionized American politics and culture in 1935, when he founded the American Institute of Public Opinion. Today, "Gallup" is synonymous with public opinion, but polling was in its infancy as Americans confronted the Great Depression, Nazism, and World War II.

Early Gallup data captivated the research team for Americans and the Holocaust. We pored over hundreds of public opinion polls from this era while planning the exhibition. Ten of these polls are included in the gallery on floor-to-ceiling columns that prompt visitors to read the polling question before turning a panel to reveal how Americans answered at the time. With the help of these polls, we are able to show that a majority of Americans worried about the economy, prefered not to admit refugees, believed that Nazi spies were a danger to the United States, hoped to stay out of war

in Europe, favored sending Japanese Americans to relocation camps, and doubted the extent of the Nazis' murder of Jews.

A visitor turns a panel in the Americans and the Holocaust exhibition to reveal the answer to a public opinion poll. —US Holocaust Memorial Museum

We included these polls in Americans and the Holocaust primarily to help visitors understand that a range of concerns and fears shaped Americans' responses to Nazism. We also hoped that these polls would engage visitors of all ages and backgrounds — and it seems to be working. In the comment book at the end of the gallery, museumgoers have called the polls "fascinating," "impactful," and "very powerful." During the exhibition's first few months, the finish even wore off the edge of the panels that were turned most frequently! By the time this magazine reaches your mailbox, they will have been touched up for the rest of the exhibition's run (until October 2021).



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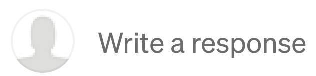

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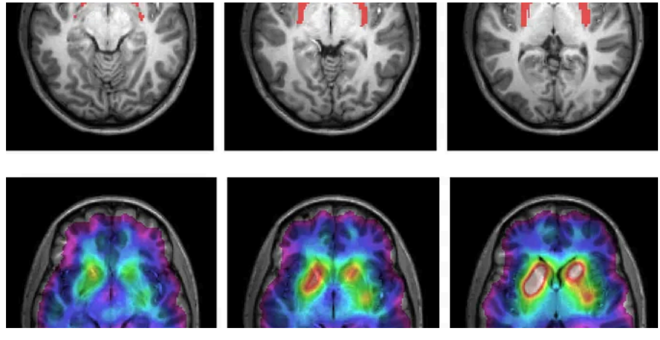

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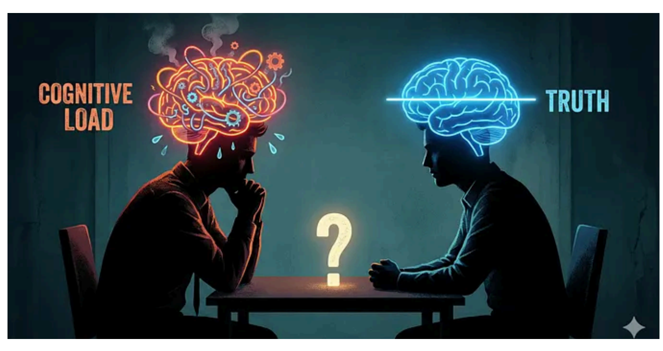

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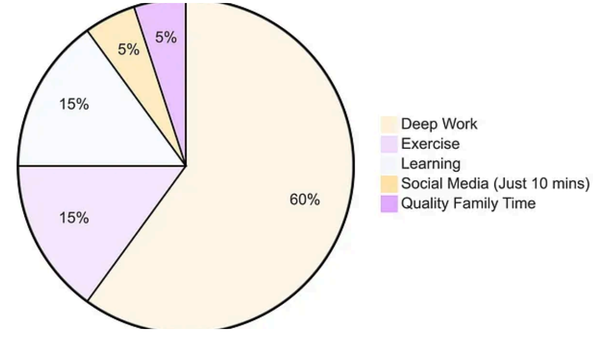

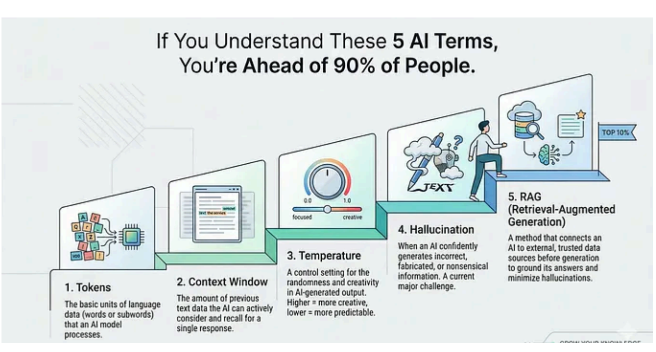

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