

Truth Behind the Myth of American Ignorance on the Holocaust

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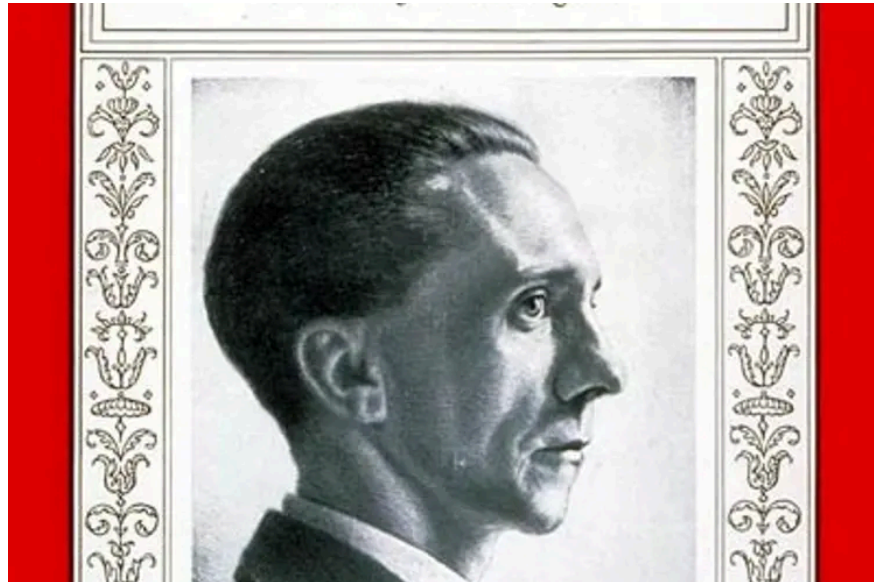
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'It's Not That the Story Was Buried.' What Americans in the 1930s Really Knew About What Was Happening in Germany

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The July 10, 1933, cover of TIMETIME

Few are as aware that the news is the [first draft of history](#) as is the team behind a recently opened exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). To put together [Americans and the Holocaust](#), they combed through the German news column in more than a decade's worth of issues of TIME magazine — and parallel sections from many other magazines and newspapers — and what they found refuted a persistent, though oft-debunked, [myth](#) about World War II and the Holocaust: the idea that, as the museum [puts it](#), "Americans lacked access to information about the persecution of Jews as it was happening."

Looking at the news that publications like TIME ran in the 1930s and '40s shows that, in fact, Americans had lots of access to news about what was happening to Europe's Jewish population and others targeted by the Nazi regime. But it also highlights a central truth about this period — and human beings in general. Reading or hearing something is not the same as understanding what it truly means, curator Daniel Greene tells TIME, and there's a wide "gap between information and understanding."

Case in point: Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels, Nazi propaganda minister, on the cover of the July 10, 1933, issue of TIME Magazine, from 85 years ago this Tuesday.

Though TIME's 1933 article, about Hitler's new cabinet, didn't yet treat Hitler with complete seriousness — he was referred to as a "Vegetarian Superman" — it didn't pull punches on the ideas behind his ascent. The article presented as fact that the consolidation of Nazi rule had lifted the spirit of the German people, even as the world watched warily, and explained that one tactic above all was helping Hitler and Goebbels with that uplift: "explaining away all Germany's defeats and trials in terms of the Jew."

It would have been impossible to read the story and miss the danger Hitler presented to his country's Jewish citizens:

| ""

That chilling last line also appeared on the [front cover](#) of the issue.

The magazine reported that sterilization of Jewish citizens had been discussed, and explained the economic consequences Jewish businesses were already facing. As Greene points out, these already horrifying concepts gain an extra layer of terror with the help of hindsight, as we know now that they were only the beginning.

The Last Nazi Trials

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So what's the source of the myth of American ignorance?

It can sometimes be hard for historians to tell what people were actually absorbing from the news of the day, but Greene doesn't think that's the main reason for this supposed gap. The main story in the 1930s was the Great Depression, but Greene says that news of the persecution — and, later, murder —

of Jews in Germany did show up in print. "It's not that the story was buried," he says. "Just like news is there today of Syria or of the danger to the Rohingya, it punctures through our consciousness at certain times."

He theorizes that perhaps there's an element of trying to excuse things or "let Americans off the hook," without fully processing the fact that the Roosevelt administration made a conscious decision, even after the U.S. entered the war, to focus on military defeat of the Nazi regime and leave the rescue of Holocaust victims as a lower priority.

Americans did have an idea what was going on, though — as is true with any news story — some people followed it more closely, and some details were hidden. It would have been public knowledge in the late 1930s (and [not entirely controversial](#)) that the U.S. was [denying entry](#) to [some](#) refugees from Hitler's regime, and by the 1940s, a precursor to the United Nations was publicly [condemning](#) the Nazi policy of [extermination](#). But, especially in that era, when [genocide](#) was still a neologism, it would have been difficult for everyday Americans to fully comprehend just what was happening.

Read more: [Behind the Picture: Joseph Goebbels Glares at the Camera, Geneva, 1933](#)

To wit, one item that's part of the USHMM exhibition shows public opinion polls demonstrating that while half of U.S. respondents in 1943 thought the fact that 2 million Jewish Europeans had been murdered was just a rumor, by 1944 about three-quarters believed concentration camps were really part of the Nazi plan — and yet they still couldn't fathom the number of victims involved. (A Gallup poll that year shows that most people who dared to guess [thought the number killed would be in the hundreds of thousands, or less](#).) Today, the fact that 6 million Jews were killed has been "seared in our collective understanding of the Holocaust," Greene says, but at the time, that number was hard to process. It still can be, which is why he says [recent evidence](#) of growing gaps in knowledge about the Holocaust is particularly troubling.

So, while the 1933 TIME cover shows that it would be reasonable to expect Americans in the early 1930s to know about the persecution and prejudice at the heart of Hitler's government — and to then follow the news of the mass murder to which it would lead within a decade — it's still no myth to say that Americans, [especially](#) those who personally witnessed the liberation of the camps, were shocked to discover the extent and cruelty of what was happening in Europe.

"You can't say that Americans didn't know anything," Greene says, "but you also can't blame them for not predicting the Holocaust."