Should the United States Have Done More in Response to the Holocaust?

**Historical Thinking Skills Assessed:** Critical Reading, Corroboration

**Author/School/System:** Caroline McDermott, Howard County Public School System, Maryland  
**Course:** United States History  
**Level:** High

**Task Question:** Should the United States have done more in response to the Holocaust?

**Learning Outcome:** Students will be able to discuss the U.S. response to the Holocaust.

**Standards Alignment:**

*Common Core Standards for Literacy for History/Social Studies*

- RH.9-10.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.
- RH.9-10.6 Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.
- WH.9-10.1 Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

*National History Standards*

Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)  
Standard 3: The causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs.

*College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards*

D2.His.1.9-12 Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

**Materials:**

- RS #01: The Historiographical Debate (Documents 1-4)  
  *Divergent explanations and assessments of the U.S. response to the Holocaust offered by historians.*
- RS #02: Historiography Organizer
- RS #03: Document Analysis (Sources A-D)  
  *Statements by journalists, the U.S. intelligence service (OSS), and President Roosevelt*
- RS #04: Close Analysis Documents (Sources E-H)  
  Source E: Remarks by President Roosevelt  
  Sources F-H: *War Department Replies to repeated official requests*  
- RS #05: Document Review Organizer
- RS #06: Congressional Hearing Organizer
- RS #07: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric - Secondary
Background for the Teacher:

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored mass murder of over six million Jews by the Nazi regime during the Second World War. It was the culmination of close to a decade of official discrimination, racial segregation, and brutal violence against the Jewish community in Germany. Under the cover of the war, the Nazis turned to systematic genocide after 1941, setting up industrial-style “extermination camps” designed to slaughter the imprisoned Jewish population of Germany and occupied Europe. While other groups were also targeted for extermination by the Nazi state, including gypsies, gays and communists, anti-Semitism was a central tenet of Nazi ideology. In fact, Hitler believed to the very end that the “war against the Jews” was a more important goal than victory in the conventional military struggles of the Second World War. The Holocaust is now considered one of the worst mass crimes in human history.

There are two main issues related to the U.S. response to the Holocaust. The first concerns the highly restrictive application of established American immigration policy to Jewish refugees seeking to escape from their increasingly violent persecution in Germany in the 1930s and from the horrors of the Holocaust during the war. The 1924 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) had imposed extremely tight limits to immigration to the U.S., and the limited quota for immigrants from Germany was not loosened in the 1930s despite growing American awareness of the systematic discrimination, mass imprisonment, and state-sponsored violence against Jews in Nazi Germany. Immigration rules were applied very strictly to exclude Jewish refugees trained in the professions, and any others who did not have a guaranteed job upon arrival in the United States. If anything, the U.S. State Department imposed additional bureaucratic hurdles by insisting on documents that refugees could not provide without exposing their plans to German authorities, such as the requirement that they secure certificates of good conduct from the German police. There is strong evidence that such intransigent regulations were motivated by anti-Semitic attitudes within the State Department.

President Roosevelt did little to change this unwelcoming attitude. Although he received frequent appeals on behalf of Jewish refugees and complaints about the State Department’s hostile application of the rules, he did not address the issue until the last year of the war. While he was genuinely horrified by Nazi treatment of the Jews, he initially accepted the State Department’s concerns about the economic impact of immigration in times of high unemployment in the 1930s, and then repeated officials’ worries that German spies could be hidden among the Jewish refugees. It was not until late in the war that the President finally shifted authority over refugee policy to an independent War Refugee Board (WRB), after he received an extremelydamning report that demonstrated that the State Department had deliberately sabotaged Jewish refugee applications. Created in January 1944, the WRB was charged with the task of saving the surviving remnants of the Jewish population of Europe.

The second historiographical question about the U.S. response to the Holocaust concerns official refusal to take military action to destroy the extermination camps in Eastern Europe and the railroad lines that transported their victims to the camps. The U.S. had solid evidence after 1942 that the Germans had embarked on a massive campaign to exterminate the Jewish population of occupied Europe. Yet destruction of the Nazi machinery of death never became part of American military agenda during the war. Behind-the-scenes requests by Jewish leaders and, eventually, the U.S. War Refugee Board that the U.S. military stop or hinder the mass murder by bombing the extermination camps were all firmly rejected. The government was worried that the Nazis would exploit the death toll from such bombing for propaganda gains. The military also insisted that it could not divert resources from the more important task of destroying German military and industrial targets, and that they could not bomb the extermination camps with sufficient precision.

The American reluctance to intervene directly to stop the Holocaust remains a deeply contested issue in the historiography of the war and President Roosevelt. Some historians argue that defeat of Hitler and his military forces was the overriding priority, and that little could be done to stop the Holocaust before the destruction of the Nazi regime. Others suggest that US refusal to bomb or otherwise destroy the
extermination camps in the 1940s only reinforces the conclusion that may be drawn from American immigration policy in the 1930s: that the tragic fate of European Jews was never an important concern for U.S. policy-makers.

Sources:

**Procedures**

**Context Setting:**
- As a warm-up, ask students the following question: “If they knew that one of their classmates was being bullied, what would they do about it? Would they ignore it or try to stop it? What might influence your opinion about how to respond?”
- Next, make a connection to world events that affect large groups of people. As: “What if a country was aware of a horrible situation, but they failed to act?” For example, if America knew about the Holocaust what should they have done about it?”
- Explain that the American government did know about growing violence and discrimination against Jews in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, yet did not act to lift the prevailing tight immigration quotas that prevented Jewish refugees from escaping to the U.S. Also, describe how the American government knew about the Holocaust as it gathered pace after 1942, yet made no direct attempts to try to help the victims or stop it.
- Why not? This is the key question in the debate among historians on the subject. At this point, you can have the students read and discuss the historian interpretations in RS#01: The Historiographical Debate. This could also be discussed after the students have reached their own conclusions, so that they can compare their findings to those of the historians.

**Historiographical Debate:**
(may be done as part of the Context Setting or after the Document Analysis)
- Explain that the lack of American response to the Holocaust remains one of the unresolved historiographical questions about the U.S. role in the Second World War.
- In small groups of 2-3, have students read Documents 1-4 and complete RS#02: Historiography Organizer.
- As a whole class, discuss the different interpretations offered by the four historians? Feingold (1) & Heuvel (2) admit that Roosevelt may not have done enough, but note the great obstacles in the way of any rescue effort, and remind us that the real culprits were the Germans. Beschloss (3), who is clearly at a loss to explain FDR’s failure to respond in any positive fashion, describes it ambiguously as a “strange lapse,” while Wyman (4) calls it as “the worst failure of his presidency.”
- Tell them that they will be reading the primary sources to make their own assessment.
- If you hold this discussion after the document analysis, have the students compare their interpretations to those of the historians.
Document Analysis:
- Distribute RS#03: Document Analysis (Sources A-D) and RS#05: Document Review Organizer.
- In their groups, have students read the sources.
- Model how to complete the first block of the graphic organizer. Have the students complete the left side (Reactions), and then analyze and answer questions about the documents in pairs or small groups.
- After students have analyzed documents and answered questions, discuss their answers as a whole class to check for understanding.

Corroborating Evidence and Constructing Interpretations – Close Analysis:
- This activity will help students to compare American reactions to the Holocaust to the evidence of U.S. actions from the documents themselves. Distribute RS#04 Close Analysis Documents (Sources E-H).
- Have students fill in the right side (ACTIONS) of RS#05: Document Review Organizer.
- This should be done independently to make sure that the students understand the main idea of each document.
- Check in with students to make sure they are putting the correct information in the correct boxes.

Thoughtful Application:
- Ask students how they feel about the American response to the Holocaust.
- Tell students they are going to simulate a Congressional Hearing in class. They will provide testimony before a “congressional committee” that is investigating the response to the Holocaust.
- Students should work in teams of four to prepare their arguments for the committee. As a team they should agree on their stance on America’s response and develop their argument using evidence from the documents to support it. Alternatively, the teacher can assign groups of students a side for which to argue.
- Using the Congressional Hearing Organizer (RS #06), each student in the group should prepare a 30-second to one-minute opening statement about their opinion on the subject and be ready to present that statement to the committee (the teacher). They should focus on a different part of the overall argument and provide the appropriate supporting evidence from the sources, with each student responsible for at least one. After the group completes the organizer, the students should independently write their statements.
- After the students have given their statements they should be prepared to answer questions from the committee or other classmates who are observing. The teacher can choose to score the students’ oral presentations, or collect their written statements and score these using the RS#07: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric – Secondary.
- At the conclusion of the testimony, have the students assess their opinions now that they have heard all sides.
Resource Sheet #01

The Historiographical Debate – Documents

Document 1

“I feel that more might have been done but I am also aware that there were many factors in the rescue situation which were simply beyond the Roosevelt Administration’s control. Not the least of these was Berlin’s determination to liquidate the Jews and the great difficulty of assigning to a modern nation-state a humanitarian mission to rescue a foreign minority for which it had no legal responsibility. It is a moral and humanitarian response we seek from the Roosevelt Administration. Such responses are rare in history and practically nonexistent during wartime.”


Document 2

“How ironic that our greatest president of this century—the man Hitler hated most, the leader constantly derided by the anti-Semites, vilified by Goebbels as a ‘mentally ill cripple’ and as ‘that Jew Rosenfeld,’ violently attacked by the isolationist press—how ironic that he should be faulted for being indifferent to the genocide. For all of us, the shadow of doubt that enough was not done will always remain, even if there was little more that could have been done. But it is the killers who bear the responsibility for their deeds. To say that ‘we are all guilty’ allows the truly guilty to avoid that responsibility. We must remember for all the days of our lives that it was Hitler who imagined the Holocaust and the Nazis who carried it out. We were not their accomplices. We destroyed them.”


Document 3

“With almost sixty years of hindsight, Roosevelt’s silence [about the plight of European Jews] seems a strange lapse in the record of a President who normally spoke to Americans on grave world issues with courage, candor and foresight. That lapse is underscored by Roosevelt’s lateness in pushing his officials to save Jewish refugees and his reluctance to seriously entertain whether bombing Auschwitz might save some of Hitler’s intended victims without postponing victory in Europe.”


Document 4

“Authenticated information that the Nazis were systematically exterminating European Jewry was made public in the United States in November 1942. President Roosevelt did nothing about the mass murder for fourteen months, then moved only because he was confronted with political pressures he could not avoid and because his administration stood on the brink of a nasty scandal over its rescue policies. . . . Franklin Roosevelt’s indifference to so momentous an historical event as the systematic annihilation of European Jewry emerges as the worst failure of his presidency.”

Resource Sheet #02

**Historiography Organizer**

<table>
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<th>Document 1</th>
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<td>Historian: __________________________</td>
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<td>Historian: __________________________</td>
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How do the four historians differ in their assessment of Roosevelt’s response to the Holocaust?

What arguments do Feingold and Heuvel offer in defense of Roosevelt?

What does Michael Beschloss mean when he describes Roosevelt’s response to the Holocaust as a “strange lapse?”

Why does David Wyman call it “the worst failure of his presidency”?
Resource Sheet #03

Document Analysis

**Source A:** *FDR statement on Krystallnacht, Nov 15, 1938*

“I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth century civilization.”

Handwritten addition by FDR to his statement to the Press after Krystallnacht (Nov 15, 1938):  

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**Source B:** *In a December 13, 1942 radio broadcast listened to by millions, popular newsman Edward R. Murrow described the situation faced by Jews in Germany as:*

“a horror beyond what imagination can grasp . . . there are no longer ‘concentration camps’—we must speak now only of ‘extermination camps.’”


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**Source C:** *From a report by the OSS regarding a further escalation of Nazi violence against Jews, received in the White House Map Room on March 17, 1943:*

“The new Nazi policy is to kill Jews on the spot rather than to deport them to Poland for extermination there.”

FDR Library, “FDR and the Holocaust,” Doc #6, Map Room Papers; MR 203(12); Sec. 1; OSS Numbered Bulletins, March-May 1943, Box 72.  

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**Source D:** *From a statement by the President, March 24, 1944:*

“...in most of Europe and in parts of Asia, the systematic murder and torture of innocent civilians - men, women and children – by the Nazis and the Japanese continues unabated. ... And one of the blackest crimes in all history – begun by the Nazis in the days of peace, and multiplied by them a hundred fold in time of war – the wholesale systematic murder of the Jews of Europe – goes on unabated every hour. ... Hitler is committing these crimes in the name of the German people. I ask every German and every man everywhere under Nazi domination to show the world by his actions that in his heart he does not share these insane criminal designs. Let him hide these pursued victims, help them to get over the border, and do what he can to save them from the Nazi hangman. ... In the meantime, and until the victory that is now assured is won, the United States will persevere in its efforts to rescue the victims of brutality of the Nazis and the Japs. In so far as the necessities of military operations permit, this Government will use all the means at its command to aid the escape of all the intended victims of the Nazi and Japanese executioner.”

FDR Library, “FDR and the Holocaust,” Document #8: Statement by the President Regarding Atrocities of War, March 24, 1944.  
President’s Personal File 1-F: Press Releases-Drafts, 1944, Box 18.  
Resource Sheet #04

Close Analysis Documents

Source E: While Roosevelt heard frequent complaints about restrictive American immigration policy and the State Department’s intransigent application of the rules to Jewish applicants, he accepted the State Department’s concerns about a more open-door policy.

At a press conference on June 5, 1940, Roosevelt stated:

“Now, of course, the refugee has got to be checked because, unfortunately, among the refugees there are some spies, as has been found in other countries. And not all of them are voluntary spies—it is rather a horrible story but in some of the other countries that refugees out of Germany have gone to, especially Jewish refugees, they found a number of definitely proven spies.”


The U.S. War Department declined repeated requests made by John W. Pehle, Director, U.S. War Refugee Board, that it bomb the extermination camps and access railway lines. Documents J-L below are excerpts from successive replies by John J. McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War:

Source F: July 4, 1944

“Dear Mr. Pehle,

... The War Department of the opinion that the suggested air operation is impracticable. It could be executed only by the diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations and would in any case be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not amount to a practical project.”


Source G: August 14, 1944

“Dear Mr. Pehle,

... such an operation could be executed only by the diversion of considerable air support...now engaged in decisive operations elsewhere and would in any case be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not warrant the use of our resources.”


Source H: November 18, 1944

“Dear Mr. Pehle:

... You forwarded the report of two eye-witnesses on the notorious German concentration and extermination camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau in Upper Silesia. The Operation Staff of the War Department has given careful consideration to your suggestion that the bombing of these camps be undertaken. In consideration of this proposal the following points were brought out:
... At the present critical stage of the war in Europe, our strategic air forces are engaged in the destruction of industrial target systems vital to the dwindling war potential of the enemy, from which they should not be diverted. ... Based on the above... the War Department has felt that it should not, at least for the present, undertake these operations.”

McCloy to Pehle. 18 Nov. 1944. PBS. *The American Experience.*  
### Document Review Organizer

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#### Questions:

- What was Krystallnacht?
- What do the documents show was known in the US about the treatment of Jews in Germany and occupied Europe?
- What was the difference between “concentration camps” and “extermination camps”?
- What is it that Roosevelt asked “every German” to do? What did he promise the U.S. would do?
- What may we expect from these statements to have been the American response to the Holocaust?
- What can we tell from Doc. K about Roosevelt’s attitude to Jewish refugees from Germany in the 1930s?
- Who was John Pehle and what can we surmise was John Pehle’s request to the War Department?
- What reasons were given by the War Department for rejecting his requests?
- What actions did the U.S. military undertake against the extermination camps during the war (Docs. L-N)?
Resource Sheet #06 – Congressional Hearing Organizer

You will work together as a team to prepare testimony to present to the United States Congress. The question before the committee is: **Should the United States have done more in response to the Holocaust?**

Your group must first decide on the stance it will take: **The U.S. did what it could** OR **The U.S. did not do enough.** Decide on 4 major points to emphasize, and which of these that each group member will present. Cite evidence to support each point. After the group completes the chart, each student will independently write a statement to be read at the beginning of the hearing. This statement should be between 30 seconds and one minute in length.

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| **Identification**: Fully understands the meaning and content of sources.  
**Attribution**: Cites all authors and all original dates of primary and secondary sources.  
**Perspective**: Evaluates the reliability sources based on the author’s perspective and when and why they were produced. | ▪ Questions the author’s thesis and determines viewpoint and evidence to evaluate claims, highlighting what the author leaves out.  
▪ Cites accurate examples of how the author uses persuasive language and specific words and phrases to influence the reader.  
▪ Seeks answers to questions left unanswered in the source to formulate an interpretation. | Constructs an interpretation of events using information and perspectives in multiple sources. Identifies consistencies and inconsistencies among various accounts. |
| **Identification**: Mostly understands the meaning and content of sources.  
**Attribution**: Cites most authors and most original dates of primary and secondary sources.  
**Perspective**: Examines the reliability of sources based on the author’s perspective and when and why they were produced. | ▪ Analyzes the author’s thesis, determines the viewpoint and evidence to evaluate the claims; may highlight what the author leaves out.  
▪ Cites examples of how the author uses persuasive language and specific words and phrases to influence the reader.  
▪ Notes that the author has left some questions unanswered. | Explains similarities and differences by comparing information and perspectives in multiple sources. |
| **Identification**: Understands the meaning and content of sources with appropriate scaffolding and support.  
**Attribution**: Cites some authors and some original dates of primary and secondary sources.  
**Perspective**: Attempts to evaluate the reliability of sources. | ▪ States the author’s claims and evidence presented to prove those claims.  
▪ Determines the author’s viewpoint.  
▪ Notes how language is used to persuade. | Identifies similarities and differences in information in multiple sources. |
| **Identification**: Attempts to understand the meaning and content of sources with the appropriate scaffolding and support.  
**Attribution**: Cites few authors and few original dates of primary and secondary sources.  
**Perspective**: Does not adequately examine reliability. | ▪ Attempts to identify the author’s claims, viewpoint, or evidence. | Demonstrates little to no attempt to examine sources for corroborating or conflicting evidence. |