



Carolina Center for the
Study of the Middle East
and Muslim Civilizations

Duke
UNIVERSITY

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES
Center

CAROLINA
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K-12

American Public Opinion on Refugees over Time

Overview

By reviewing data from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum from the 1930s and 1940s, students will consider perceptions of refugees in the United States over time. Students will critically analyze historical documents and connect them with similarly themed current events/today's refugee crisis. Students will explore stories of refugees and develop empathy for what it is like being an outcast, yearning for freedom and opportunity in a foreign land.

Essential/Compelling Question(s)

1. What is the historical perception of the American public regarding refugees from war-torn countries?
2. What inferences can we make about the American public based on the opinions of the past concerning refugees from countries affected by war and/or internal governmental strife?
3. What can we learn from past American public opinion on refugees that we can apply to the present day/current perception of refugees, so that we as a country do not repeat mistakes of the past?

Grade(s)

10

Subject(s)

English II/World Literature

Essential Standards

- **RI.9-10.1** Determine which citations demonstrate what the text says explicitly as well as inferentially.
- (Historical documents) **RI.9-10.9** Make connections between texts with related themes and concepts
- (Argumentative Writing) **W.9-10.1** Write claims about topics or texts.
 - a. Introduce a topic or text and write one claim and one counterclaim about it.
- (Informative/Explanatory Writing) **W.9-10.2** Write to share information supported by details.
 - a. Introduce a topic clearly and use a clear organization to write about it including visual, tactual, or multimedia information as appropriate.
 - b. Develop the topic with facts or details.
- (Collaborative Discussions) **SL.9-10.1** Communicate with others in group interactions.
 - a. Prepare for discussions by collecting information on the topic.
 - b. Work with adults and peers to set rules for discussions.
 - c. Relate the topic of discussion to broader themes or ideas.

Materials

- [Survey/poll questions and answers](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, from the 1930s and 1940s regarding the perceptions of Americans about Jewish refugees from Germany.
- [Additional resources and lessons](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
- Data on global displacement from the [UNHCR](#)
- Refugee stories, like these from the [World Economic Forum](#) (2015) or [Medium.com](#) (2017)

Duration

60 minutes

This lesson was created by Guy Hill as part of the Middle East and African Cultures Teacher Fellows Program. For more information about the program, please visit ncmideast.org/meac-teacher-fellows

Procedure

1. Tell students that they will be considering attitudes of Americans towards refugees over time in this lesson, beginning with Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Remind students that due to persecution of Jewish people as the Nazis rose to power in Germany, many fled for their survival and became refugees seeking safe havens in other parts of Europe and beyond. At first, Jewish refugees were allowed to settle in neighboring countries such as Belgium, France, and Czechoslovakia, but as German occupation spread across the continent, these countries were no longer safe and refugees became increasingly desperate to escape¹.

This refugee crisis created a dilemma for many nations, including the United States. In July 1938, delegates from 32 nations met in Evian, France, to discuss how to respond to the refugee crisis. Each representative expressed regret about the current troubles of refugees, but most said that they were unable to increase their country's immigration quotas, citing the worldwide economic depression¹.

2. Ask students survey questions from the 1930s/40s concerning Germany, Jewish refugees, and Japanese people from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Ask students to speculate both what they think the answer to the question would be in the 1930s/40s (yes/no), as well as their own answer to the survey/poll questions (yes/no). The questions are below²:
 - "Do you approve or disapprove of the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany?"
 - "Do you think the United States should declare war on Germany and send our army and navy abroad to fight?"
 - "It has been proposed that the government permit 10,000 refugee children from Germany to be brought into this country and taken care of in American homes. Do you favor this plan?"
 - "Should we allow a large number of Jewish exiles from Germany to come to the United States to live?"
 - "Do you think we are doing the right thing in moving Japanese aliens (those who are not citizens) away from the Pacific Coast?"
3. After students have made their guesses, the teacher should reveal the actual poll results from the 1930s/40s (below, pie charts also available from the [American Holocaust Memorial Museum](https://www.ushmm.org/american-holocaust-museum)).
4. Lead a class discussion comparing the plight of Jewish refugees in the 1930s/40s to refugees today. Discuss with students:
 - Was your prediction of the poll results close to the actual numbers? How accurate was your prediction?
 - If there was a discrepancy of more than 5-10 percentage points, why do you think that is?
 - What do the Poll results tell you about American society or the American people at the time? What inferences can you make based on the data?
 - Are there any contemporary parallels to that refugee situation of the past? What recent history parallels can we make? (country or origin, ethnicity, or religion)

Students should understand that like most other countries, the United States did not welcome Jewish refugees from Europe. Reasons include fear of burden that immigrants could place on the nation's

¹ From Facing History and Ourselves, <https://www.facinghistory.org/defying-nazis/america-and-holocaust>

² Data from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, see pie chart of data from the American Institute of Public Opinion at <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/americans-and-the-holocaust/topics/public-opinion>

economy; high unemployment due to the Great Depression; feelings of fear, mistrust, and event hatred towards those who were different; fears of communist infiltrators and Nazi spies; and anti-Semitism¹.

5. Tell students that today, an unprecedented 68.5 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 25.4 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. There are also an estimated 10 million stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement. Nearly 1 person is forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution³.

Despite the high numbers of refugees, the number of refugees resettled in the U.S. decreased more than in any other country in 2017. In 2017, the U.S. resettled 33,000 refugees, the lowest total since the two years after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and a steep drop from 2016. Non-U.S. countries resettled more than twice as many refugees as the U.S. in 2017, marking the first time since the adoption of the 1980 U.S. Refugee Act that America's total fell below the combined total from the rest of the world⁴.

6. Allow students to explore contemporary stories of refugees such as these three stories from the [World Economic Forum](#) (2015) or these stories from [Medium.com](#) (2017). If students have access to laptops/iPads, they can read the stories online, or the teacher can print out the stories for students to read in small groups. Lead a class discussion to help students develop empathy for refugees:
 - What were your biggest take-aways from the refugee stories?
 - Did reading the personal stories of real people change your perception of refugees?
 - How would you feel if you were forced to flee your home and move to another place?
 - Does the United States have a responsibility to accept refugees? Why or why not?
 - What do you know about the process of refugee resettlement in the United States?
 - What can we do to make our community a welcoming place for refugees?

³ Statistics from the United States High Commissioner for Refugees, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

⁴ Data from the Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/05/for-the-first-time-u-s-resettles-fewer-refugees-than-the-rest-of-the-world/>

Poll Questions from the American Institute of Public Opinion, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

1. "Do you approve or disapprove of the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany?"
2. "Do you think the United States should declare war on Germany and send our army and navy abroad to fight?"
3. "It has been proposed that the government permit 10,000 refugee children from Germany to be brought into this country and taken care of in American homes. Do you favor this plan?"
4. "Should we allow a large number of Jewish exiles from Germany to come to the United States to live?"
5. "Do you think we are doing the right thing in moving Japanese aliens (those who are not citizens) away from the Pacific Coast?"

Poll Results

1. Disapprove 94% Approve 6%
2. 93%No 7%Yes
3. 66% No 26% Yes 8% No Opinion
4. 71% No 21% Yes 8% No Opinion
5. 93% Yes 1%No 6% No Opinion

"Do you approve or disapprove of the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany?"

Disapprove 94% Approve 6%

"Do you think the United States should declare war on Germany and send our army and navy abroad to fight?"

93% No 7% Yes

"It has been proposed that the government permit 10,000 refugee children from Germany to be brought into this country and taken care of in American homes. Do you favor this plan?"

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"Do you think we are doing the right thing in moving Japanese aliens (those who are not citizens) away from the Pacific Coast?"

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