



Franklin D. Roosevelt  
Presidential Library and Museum

## CURRICULUM GUIDE

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### **Investigating the Holocaust** *Nuremberg: Its Lesson for Today*

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## SECTION V

# The Roosevelt Administration: Actions and Inaction

America's response to the Holocaust has become the subject of intense historical interest in recent decades. Historians debate why FDR and other American decisionmakers did not do more to admit Jewish refugees and undertake policies – including bombing rail lines to Auschwitz or Auschwitz itself – that might have saved lives.

Questions, such as those listed below, will likely be debated for decades to come.

- 1) What did the Roosevelt Administration do to end the suffering of Jews during World War II?
- 2) Could/should it have done more?
- 3) If so, why didn't it?
- 4) Why didn't it take action sooner?

Some scholars have criticized President Roosevelt for his approach to refugee issues prior to and during World War II, and he is even accused of having pursued misguided policies and of being indifferent to the Holocaust.

Others insist that such assessments fail to account adequately for the American public's pre-war isolationism and anti-Semitism; strict immigration and quota laws that enjoyed wide public and Congressional support; and military practicalities that – for much of the war – limited the Allies' ability, some charge, to reach Jews trapped deep behind enemy lines.

### **What was the Roosevelt Administration's overall response to the Holocaust?**

Roosevelt believed that the surest way to stop the killing of innocent civilians was to defeat Hitler's Germany as quickly, and decisively, as possible. After Pearl Harbor, American anger was overwhelmingly directed at Japan. Yet Roosevelt knew that Germany posed the greater immediate danger. Germany was putting intense pressure on Britain and the Soviet Union, and FDR could not risk their falling under Hitler's control.

*"It is of the utmost importance that we appreciate that defeat of Japan does not defeat Germany and that American concertation against Japan this year or in 1943 increases the chance of complete German domination of Europe and Africa."*

– President Roosevelt to General George Marshall  
and Admiral Ernest King, July 14, 1942



# The Roosevelt Administration: Actions and Inaction

## Considering the Critiques of the Roosevelt Approach

Some believe that FDR's "win the war" approach did not address the possibility that significant numbers of Jews could have been rescued in the meantime. Others believed that the President was limited in what he could do by a number of factors that were largely out of his control.

1) Ask your students to read, research, and respond to the claims made by the historians below.

### Perspective One:

*"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... 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."*

David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*

### Perspective Two:

*"America's disregard for what was happening inside Nazi Germany was caused by more than unthinking prejudice. The easiest, most charitable explanation lay in America's preoccupation with itself. Adolf Hitler's appointment as chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, virtually coincided with Franklin Roosevelt's swearing in as the thirty-second president of the United States, and the chaos that confronted Roosevelt as he took office dwarfed consideration of what was occurring elsewhere in the world. America was paralyzed financially: nearly thirteen million people – one-fourth of the labor force – were unemployed; national income was half what it had been in 1928; every bank in the country had closed its doors; and the republic was at or near the nadir of the gravest economic depression in its history. With good reason, many thoughtful citizens believed that revolution was at hand. Americans were understandably obsessed with the woes that afflicted themselves and their families... In the face of preoccupation with questions like these, it was little wonder if the average American was largely unaware, initially at least, of the terrifying brutality that had been unleashed in Germany... Compounding the political problems fueled by unemployment and depression were two other factors: flagrant anti-Semitism and a nativism no less virulent than the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant forces... of the 1840s and 50s. What this meant to the beleaguered Jews in Germany was that the leader of the world's most powerful democracy – the man they counted on to offer them support and relief – was in a very touchy position [with] many of this country's political conservatives, who were the last people likely to do much to assist the Jews."*

Richard M. Ketchum, *The Borrowed Years, 1938-1941: American on the Way to War*  
(Random House, 1989) 108-110

### Perspective Three:

*"Roosevelt knew that no exercise of personal charm could bring a change to the immigration law and no Administration attempt to do so was ever hinted at. Instead the Administration directed its attention to liberalizing the implementation of the law, especially the visa procedure... Roosevelt ordered the State Department to extend to the refugees crowding the understaffed consulates "the most humane treatment possible under the law." Despite such exhortations the visa procedure caused much anguish within the Jewish community and much strife within the Administration... Complaints regarding the visa procedure continued to flow into the White House and it soon became apparent that the Administration's good*

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*intentions remained largely rhetorical. They were being thwarted by the recalcitrance of the consular officials who legally held the final responsibility for determining whether visa applicants qualified. By late 1938 and early 1939, the reaction pattern of the Administration seemed clear. It was carefully attempting to pick its way between two forces at minimal political risk. On the one hand there existed strong restrictionist sentiment generated by the Depression, and on the other a particularly loyal Jewish community allied with other liberal elements which was urging that the tradition of asylum for the persecuted of Europe be at least nominally maintained...Generally Roosevelt was content to let the State Department handle the refugee matter. He preferred to remain above the battle although he might occasionally make an inquiry or a suggestion. Such a procedure, Roosevelt had discovered in other areas, offered certain advantages, especially if the issue proved nettlesome. It allowed the agency involved to absorb much of the pressure and ire that might otherwise be directed at the White House."*

Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945* (Rutgers University Press, 1970) 16-18

*Extension Questions: Which of the perspectives above seems to be the most plausible?*

- 1) Are the perspectives being "fair" in their assessment of the Roosevelt Administration?
- 2) How have the views concerning the Roosevelt Administration's actions and inactions changed over time?
- 3) After reviewing the documents in this section, Ask your students to write their own short paragraph outlining your views on the Roosevelt Administration's response to the Holocaust.
- 4) Ask students to share, and defend, their particular perspective. Remind them that this has been a widely debated topic in academic circles for decades past and will be for decades to come.

## Selected documents relating to the Roosevelt Administration's response to the Holocaust

**Document V-A:** *Letter, FDR to New York Governor Herbert Lehman, November 13, 1935*

Throughout the 1930s, President Roosevelt was kept informed of the growing refugee crisis in Europe by political leaders with ties to the American Jewish community, including New York Governor Herbert Lehman. Through these contacts, Roosevelt also learned that the strict immigration quotas in place at the time were not being fully or fairly administered by his own State Department. In this November 13, 1935 letter, the President advises Lehman of the results of his own examination of the visa issue, the legal limitations imposed by the Immigration Act of 1924, and his instruction to the State Department that German Jews applying for visas were to be given "the most generous and favorable treatment possible under the laws of this country." (President's Official File 133: Immigration, 1933-35, Box 1).

**Document V-B:** *Memorandum for Missy LeHand from Stephen Early, November 13, 1936*

Because of the country's isolationism and the immigration laws in place in the mid-1930s, President Roosevelt often felt constrained in taking a more proactive stance with regard to European refugees. In this November 13, 1936, memorandum for the President's private secretary Missy LeHand, Press Secretary Stephen Early recommends that the President resist the



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temptation to issue a requested appeal on behalf of persecuted Christians in Germany. Such an appeal, in the opinion of Early and the State Department, would be an inappropriate expression of the President's preference for one group of refugees over others. The President indicates his acceptance of Early's recommendation at the bottom of the memo. (President's Official File 133: Immigration, 1936-1941, Box 1).

**Document V-C:** *Draft Statement by the President, November 15, 1938*

When the reports of the Nazi violence were confirmed, the President drafted this statement expressing his outrage at *Kristallnacht* and recalling the American ambassador to Germany. The changes and additions are in the President's own hand, and the final message was approved by Secretary of State Cordell Hull who placed his initials in the lower right hand corner. The President read the statement at his press conference held on November 15, 1938. (President's Secretary's Files; Diplomatic Correspondence; Germany, 1933-1938, Box 31).

**Document V-D:** *Telegram from "A Fed Up American Gentile," November 17, 1938*

FDR's executive actions and public statements on behalf of German Jews after *Kristallnacht* also resulted in hateful and extreme anti-Semitic mail being sent to the White House. In this telegram, a self-declared but anonymous "Fed Up American Gentile" from New Jersey threatened FDR with revolution or impeachment for being the puppet of "International Jew War Mongers" and "Washington Jewish Minorities." The White House did not respond to this message. (Official File 76c: Church Matters-Jewish, 1938).

**Document V-E:** *State Department Memorandum of Conversation Regarding the SS St. Louis June 8, 1939*

On May 13, 1939 – three months before World War II – the SS *St. Louis*, a ship carrying 937 German Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, sailed from Hamburg for Cuba. Other ships had made the same journey, and their refugee passengers had disembarked in Havana. But the Cuban government, responding to corruption and anti-Semitic political pressure, ordered the enforcement of new visa requirements when the *St. Louis* arrived. Twenty-two passengers who met the new requirements were allowed to land. The remaining passengers were forced to remain on board the ship. Negotiations with the Cuban government led by the American Joint Distribution Committee – a private Jewish organization – broke down, despite pressure from the U.S. government, as can be seen in this Memorandum of Conversation written by the U.S. Ambassador to Cuba, J. Butler Wright. Tremendous public attention focused on the *St. Louis*. The ship's passengers even cabled the White House, but the matter was referred to the State Department. America's immigration laws did not permit their entry into the United States since they did not have U.S. visas. American diplomats were able to help resettle the refugees in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark. But many later fell into Nazi hands during the war. Contrary to popular belief, there was no specific or official order by FDR refusing entry of the *St. Louis* refugees. (Sumner Welles Papers; Office Correspondence; File: Wright, J. Butler, April-June 1939; Box).

**Document V-F:** *Charts of German American Bund Activities 1939*

As the world crisis worsened, isolationist and non-interventionist organizations increasingly challenged any efforts by FDR to aid threatened democracies abroad and prepare the nation for possible war. Their isolationist rhetoric was often mixed with racial prejudice and a suspicion of foreigners. One of the most ominous of these organizations was the German American Bund, a domestic pro-Nazi group that preached fascism and anti-Semitism and had chapters across the

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country. The Roosevelt Administration was concerned about the potentially contagious influence of the Bund and similar organizations on public opinion. It kept close watch over their activities, as can be seen in this series of charts provided to FDR by the State Department. (President's Secretary's Files; Departmental Files; State Department-German American Bund; Box 7).

**Document V-G:** *Albert Einstein's Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, July 26, 1941*

Eleanor Roosevelt's efforts to aid Europe's refugees continued into the war years. She was seen by many as a trusted advocate who could bring their views to President Roosevelt's attention. In July 1941, acclaimed physicist and German-Jewish immigrant Albert Einstein wrote this letter to Mrs. Roosevelt urging her to tell the President about the State Department's rigid application of immigration rules and regulations. A "wall of bureaucratic measures" erected by the State Department, Einstein asserts, made it all but impossible to aid the victims of Nazi brutality. At the bottom of the letter in Eleanor Roosevelt's handwriting are two notes. One says simply "FDR" and is an instruction to her secretary to send Einstein's letter to the President. The second notation is Mrs. Roosevelt's reply to Einstein which was later typed into a letter: "Tell Mr. Einstein I will bring his letter at once to the President." Although Einstein's letter was given to FDR, there is no evidence that the President responded to him or took any action based upon it. (President's Personal File 7177: Albert Einstein).

**Document V-H:** *Memo from the Secretary of State and Statement by the President, October 24-25, 1941*

In the fall of 1941, news of Nazi atrocities against Jews in occupied Europe filled America's newspapers. Reports filtered out of Jews dying in Polish ghettos, of executions of Jews in Germany, Poland and Russia, and of mass deportations. These reports constituted a first glimpse of what was developing into a systematic campaign by the Nazis to rid Europe of its Jewish populations. On October 24, Secretary of State Cordell Hull sent this memo to FDR proposing that he issue a statement in coordination with the British and other Allied governments denouncing the Nazi atrocities. Roosevelt's handwritten note at the bottom orders that the statement be released at 12:00 noon the next day, "unless previously announced in London." The statement carefully avoids identifying victims as Jewish, but makes it clear that such actions against innocent civilians "will one day bring fearful retribution." (Official File 198: Germany, 1941-1943).

**Document V-I:** *Eleanor Roosevelt's Draft "My Day" Column, October 25, 1941*


Although FDR felt politically constrained in the fall of 1941 from clearly identifying victims of Nazi brutality as Jewish, Eleanor Roosevelt felt no such limitations. In this draft of her "My Day" column which appeared in newspapers on October 25, she publicly grapples with the difficult subject of mass deportations of Jews from Germany to Poland and Russia and tries to make the horrors in Europe more relatable to her readers. Admitting that the deportation experience was difficult for Americans to imagine, Mrs. Roosevelt writes, "It would be a kind of leave-taking which could savor somewhat of death. In all partings with people whom we love, there is in a minor way that sense of temporary loss which presages the horrible finality of separation which comes over one at the time of death." (Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Speech and Article File: My Day Drafts; Box 1432).

**Document V-J:** *Memorandum for the Secretary's Files, January 16, 1944*

A seminal moment in the Roosevelt Administration's response to the Holocaust was a January 16, 1944, meeting at the White House involving the President, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Treasury's general counsel Randolph Paul, and Morgenthau's assistant John W. Pehle. At this meeting, Secretary Morgenthau presented to the President a lengthy and blunt "Personal Report" on what Morgenthau and other Treasury officials



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believed to be the State Department's acquiescence in Germany's mass murder of Jews. The startling evidence presented to the President of the State Department's incompetence, delay, and even obstruction of a variety of rescue efforts convinced him of the need to establish an independent commission to coordinate rescue and relief efforts. This contemporaneous memorandum was written by John Pehle, who attended the meeting and who would become the first Director of the War Refugee Board, which FDR established by executive order several days later. (Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Book 694, Pages 190-192).

**Document V-K:** *Statement by the President Regarding Atrocities of War, March 24, 1944*

As the number and ferocity of wartime atrocities increased, President Roosevelt believed it necessary to issue another, more forceful statement condemning Nazi and Japanese brutalities, and specifically mentioning the mass murder of European Jews. In the statement, Roosevelt made it clear that Allied victory was inevitable and that all those responsible for these horrific crimes against humanity would be brought to justice. The statement was issued on March 24, 1944. In order to insure its penetration into German-controlled territories, it was printed in many languages and dropped as leaflets, and the British Broadcasting Company relayed the statement in many languages to enemy and occupied countries. This particular draft of the statement was filed in the White House files on April 3, 1944. (President's Personal File 1-F: Press Releases-Drafts, 1944, Box 18).

**Document V-L:** *Letter, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy to John W. Pehle, July 4, 1944*

One of the most controversial aspects of the Roosevelt Administration's reaction to the Holocaust is the decision not to bomb rail lines used to transport prisoners to Auschwitz. As early as March 1943, requests for bombing of Hitler's instruments of death had reached various government officials from Jewish sources both at home and abroad. The Administration was reluctant to take such action, though, because of the danger of the raids also killing the prisoners they were meant to save as well as of the practicality of diverting military resources that were needed elsewhere to defeat Germany. In 1944, War Refugee Board Director John W. Pehle made several direct appeals to the War Department for the bombing of various camps and rail lines. This July 4, 1944, letter from Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy to Pehle – written one month after the D-Day invasion of Northwest Europe – states the military's position with regard to such suggestions, and reflects Roosevelt's belief that the surest way to end the killing was to defeat Nazi Germany as quickly as possible. (War Refugee Board Records; Projects and Documents File; Measures Directed Toward Halting Persecutions; Hungary No. 5, Box 42).

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## Document Based Questions

**Document V-A:** *Letter, FDR to New York Governor Herbert Lehman, November 13, 1935*

Throughout the 1930s, President Roosevelt was kept informed of the growing refugee crisis in Europe by political leaders with ties to the American Jewish community, including New York Governor Herbert Lehman. Through these contacts, Roosevelt also learned that the strict immigration quotas in place at the time were not being fully or fairly administered by his own State Department. In this November 13, 1935, letter, the President advises Lehman of the results of his own examination of the visa issue, the legal limitations imposed by the Immigration Act of 1924, and his instruction to the State Department that German Jews applying for visas were to be given “the most generous and favorable treatment possible under the laws of this country.” (President’s Official File 133: Immigration, 1933-35, Box 1).

### Document Based Questions

- 1) In paragraph two FDR says, “I have brought your letter to the particular attention of the Department of State...” why does he indicate he has sent it to them for action?
- 2) What indication does FDR give that he has confidence that the State Department will competently address the concerns?
- 3) In paragraph three FDR explains that the State Department is somewhat limited in what they can do. What does he say is limiting them?
- 4) In paragraph four FDR admits that he is now aware that the quotas have been being under-issued. For how long has this been going on? Why would FDR not have found out about this sooner?
- 5) In paragraph six FDR says that Jews seeking to escape Germany should be given “the most generous and favorable treatment possible under the laws of this country.” Given that FDR makes no pledge to review, or loosen, the laws regarding immigration, how helpful do you think this pledge actually was?

### Document V-A Extension Questions

- 1) On the one hand, FDR seems to be defending the State Department as being confined by the existing laws while making no pledge to loosen them, and on the other hand, he is instructing the State Department to be “most generous” in waiving some legal requirements and granting visas to German Jews. To what extent do these cancel each other out?
- 2) In the final three paragraphs, FDR lays out remedies and procedures for how the problem will be addressed. Ultimately how effective were they?

**Document V-B:** *Memorandum for Missy LeHand from Stephen Early, November 13, 1936*

Because of the country’s isolationism and the immigration laws in place in the mid-1930s, President Roosevelt often felt constrained in taking a more proactive stance with regard to European refugees. In this November 13, 1936, memorandum for the President’s private secretary Missy LeHand, Press Secretary Stephen Early recommends that the President resist the temptation to issue a requested appeal on behalf of persecuted Christians in Germany. Such an



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appeal, in the opinion of Early and the State Department, would be an inappropriate expression of the President's preference for one group of refugees over others. The President indicates his acceptance of Early's recommendation at the bottom of the memo. (President's Official File 133: Immigration, 1936-1941, Box 1).

## *Document Based Questions*

- 1) What is this memorandum asking President Roosevelt to do?
- 2) How does the State Department suggest the request be addressed?
- 3) What is the reason the State Department is giving for suggesting that Mr. Pickett's request be denied?
- 4) Exactly one year to the day before this request was received, President Roosevelt gave his approval for German Jewish refugees to be given "the most generous and favorable treatment possible under the laws of this country." (See Document One, Letter, FDR to New York Governor Herbert Lehman, November 13, 1935) Is refusing to honor the request of Reverend Dr. Fosdick a double standard?
- 5) Why do you think that Mr. Early recommends the situation be explained by phone rather than by letter?

## *Document V-B Extension Questions*

- 1) FDR accepts Mr. Early's recommendation without question or comment. Why do you suppose this is the case?
- 2) Compare and contrast the November 13, 1935, letter from Governor Lehman with the November 13, 1936, memo from Stephen Early. Why were the two requests handled in exactly opposite ways?

## **Document V-C:** *Draft Statement by the President, November 15, 1938*

On the night of November 9-10, 1938, the Nazi Party escalated its organized persecution of German and Austrian Jews in what has become known as Kristallnacht, or the Night of the Broken Glass. In the course of just a few hours, 815 shops, 171 homes, and 76 synagogues were destroyed; an additional 191 synagogues were set on fire; 36 Jews were murdered, another 36 seriously injured, and some 20,000 were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

When the reports of the Nazi violence were confirmed, the President drafted this statement expressing his outrage at Kristallnacht and recalling the American ambassador to Germany. The changes and additions are in the President's own hand, and the final message was approved by Secretary of State Cordell Hull who placed his initials in the lower right hand corner. The President read the statement at his press conference held on November 15, 1938. (President's Secretary's Files; Diplomatic Correspondence; Germany, 1933-1938, Box 31).

# The Roosevelt Administration: Actions and Inaction

## Document Based Questions

- 1) How does President Roosevelt describe the nation's response to the news coming out of Germany?
- 2) FDR adds the phrase, "in every part of the nation." to mirror the phrase, "from any part of the world" which he uses earlier in the sentence, how does this make the statement more meaningful and effective?
- 3) What action does FDR direct the State Department to take regarding the American Ambassador in Berlin?
- 4) What is FDR expecting from the Ambassador upon his return to Washington?
- 5) Why would FDR add the hand-written sentence on the bottom of the draft?

## Document V-C Extension Questions

- 1) What does FDR's written sentence, "I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth century civilization." tell you about his view of the situation in Germany? Why might he feel this way?
- 2) Why do you suppose the news of the events surrounding *Kristallnacht* were so shocking to FDR?
- 3) What advice would you give to President Roosevelt regarding his statement?

## Document V-D: Telegram from "A Fed Up American Gentile," November 17, 1938

FDR's executive actions and public statements on behalf of German Jews after *Kristallnacht* also resulted in hateful and extreme anti-Semitic mail being sent to the White House. In this telegram, a self-declared but anonymous "Fed Up American Gentile" from New Jersey threatened FDR with revolution or impeachment for being the puppet of "International Jew War Mongers" and "Washington Jewish Minorities." The White House did not respond to this message. (Official File 76c: Church Matters-Jewish, 1938)

## Document Based Questions

- 1) What is the tone of this telegram?
- 2) Why does the author of the telegram suggest that the views and opinions of "genuine American Gentiles...millions of them...are completely unheard...?"
- 3) To whom does "anonymous" say the country is being given away to?
- 4) What does "anonymous" predict may happen if Roosevelt does not change course regarding "Washington, Jewish, minorities?"
- 5) List and describe the various examples of hate speech used in this telegram.
- 6) What Jewish stereotypes does "anonymous" use in this telegram?



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## Document V-D Extension Questions

- 1) Why do you suppose the White House chose not to respond to this telegram?
- 2) If you had been asked to draft a response, what would you have said to counter the claims of “anonymous?”
- 3) Why do you suppose the author of the telegram wanted to stay anonymous?
- 4) Why do you suppose anonymous is feeling “fed up”?
- 5) Compare and contrast modern day examples of hate speech to that used in the telegram. In what ways have things changed? In what ways have they stayed the same?
- 6) Is this telegram covered under the protections of the First Amendment’s freedom of speech? Should it be?

**Document V-E:** *State Department Memorandum of Conversation Regarding the SS St. Louis June 8, 1939*  
On May 13, 1939 – three months before World War II – the SS St. Louis, a ship carrying 937 German Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, sailed from Hamburg for Cuba. Other ships had made the same journey, and their refugee passengers had disembarked in Havana. But the Cuban government, responding to corruption and anti-Semitic political pressure, ordered the enforcement of new visa requirements when the St. Louis arrived. Twenty-two passengers who met the new requirements were allowed to land. The remaining passengers were forced to remain on board the ship. Negotiations with the Cuban government led by the American Joint Distribution Committee – a private Jewish organization – broke down, despite pressure from the U.S. government, as can be seen in this Memorandum of Conversation written by the U.S. Ambassador to Cuba, J. Butler Wright. Tremendous public attention focused on the St. Louis. The ship’s passengers even cabled the White House, but the matter was referred to the State Department. America’s immigration laws did not permit their entry into the United States since they did not have U.S. visas. American diplomats were able to help resettle the refugees in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark. But many later fell into Nazi hands during the war. Contrary to popular belief, there was no specific or official order by FDR refusing entry of the St. Louis refugees. (Sumner Welles Papers; Office Correspondence; File: Wright, J. Butler, April-June 1939; Box).

## Document Based Questions

- 1) Ambassador Wright points out at least twice that he is acting “informally and based on humanitarian considerations alone.” What does that mean? Why is it so important?
- 2) What reason does the president of Cuba give to Ambassador Wright for refusing to talk about the SS *St. Louis*?
- 3) How does the Cuban president respond when Ambassador Wright says he is “speaking purely through our humanitarian interest”?
- 4) What is the provision that most of the passengers on the SS *St. Louis* failed to secure and that then led to them being refused entry into Cuba?

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## *Document V-E Extension Questions*

- 1) Who do you suppose gave Ambassador Wright, “specific instructions not to intervene” in Cuba’s immigration matters?
- 2) What right does the United States – or any other country – have in questioning the terms which another country has set for who is, and who is not allowed entry into their country?
- 3) If the Cuban Government made the new monetary regulations known, and twenty-two passengers on board the SS *St. Louis* had complied and were allowed entry, where rests the responsibility for those who failed to comply and were sent back?

## **Documents V-F:** *Charts of German American Bund Activities 1939*

As the world crisis worsened, isolationist and non-interventionist organizations increasingly challenged any efforts by FDR to aid threatened democracies abroad and prepare the nation for possible war. Their isolationist rhetoric was often mixed with racial prejudice and a suspicion of foreigners. One of the most ominous of these organizations was the German American Bund, a domestic pro-Nazi group that preached fascism and anti-Semitism and had chapters across the country. The Roosevelt Administration was concerned about the potentially contagious influence of the Bund and similar organizations on public opinion. It kept close watch over their activities, as can be seen in this series of charts provided to FDR by the State Department. (President’s Secretary’s Files; Departmental Files; State Department-German American Bund; Box 73)

## *Document Based Questions*

- 1) According to the German American Bund, who is responsible for the quote that describes the symbolism of the Nazi flag?
- 2) According to the quote, what are four key beliefs symbolized in the flag of the Nazi Party? What is the belief that underpins everything else?
- 3) Describe how these beliefs are at odds with American values such as equal protection under the law and freedom of religion.
- 4) How many members does the American Bund appear to have?
- 5) According to the quote on the membership chart, how many potential members are there in the United States? Who is that quote from?
- 6) In what area of the United States is the bulk of the membership located?

## *Documents V-F Extension Questions*

- 1) Why might some people in the United States be drawn to this way of thinking?
- 2) Who is being targeted with this propaganda?
- 3) Who are the “Aryans?”
- 4) Why do you suppose the greatest portion of the German American Bund’s membership comes from the “Eastern Department?”



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**Document V-G:** *Albert Einstein's Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, July 26, 1941*

Eleanor Roosevelt's efforts to aid Europe's refugees continued into the war years. She was seen by many as a trusted advocate who could bring their views to President Roosevelt's attention. In July 1941, acclaimed physicist and German-Jewish immigrant Albert Einstein wrote this letter to Mrs. Roosevelt urging her to tell the President about the State Department's rigid application of immigration rules and regulations. A "wall of bureaucratic measures" erected by the State Department, Einstein asserts, made it all but impossible to aid the victims of Nazi brutality. At the bottom of the letter in Eleanor Roosevelt's handwriting are two notes. One says simply "FDR" and is an instruction to her secretary to send Einstein's letter to the President. The second notation is Mrs. Roosevelt's reply to Einstein which was later typed into a letter: "Tell Mr. Einstein I will bring his letter at once to the President." Although Einstein's letter was given to FDR, there is no evidence that the President responded to him or took any action based upon it. (President's Personal File 7177: Albert Einstein).

## *Document Based Questions*

- 1) Why does Professor Einstein feel he can write to Mrs. Roosevelt concerning this matter?
- 2) What do you suppose Professor Einstein means when he uses the term, "wall of bureaucratic measures"?
- 3) Professor Einstein says that the bureaucratic measures are "alleged" to be necessary to protect America against subversive, dangerous elements. What does his choice of the word alleged suggest about his belief that the measures are actually needed?
- 4) What is Professor Einstein asking Mrs. Roosevelt to do?
- 5) What is Mrs. Roosevelt's response to the professor's request?

## *Document V-G Extension Questions*

- 1) Professor Einstein says Mrs. Roosevelt "always stand[s] for the right and humaneness even when it is hard." What are some examples from the life of Mrs. Roosevelt that demonstrate this?
- 2) Who is Hamilton Fish Armstrong?
- 3) Professor Einstein refers to a "wall of bureaucratic measures" in his 1941 letter to Mrs. Roosevelt. Today, some talk of building an actual wall to keep people from coming to the United States. Are these actions consistent with the message of America as stated on, and symbolized by, the Statue of Liberty?

**Document V-H:** *Memo from the Secretary of State and Statement by the President, October 24-25, 1941*

In the fall of 1941, news of Nazi atrocities against Jews in occupied Europe filled America's newspapers. Reports filtered out of Jews dying in Polish ghettos, of executions of Jews in Germany, Poland, and Russia, and of mass deportations. These reports constituted a first glimpse of what was developing into a systematic campaign by the Nazis to rid Europe of its Jewish populations. On October 24, Secretary of State Cordell Hull sent this memo to FDR proposing that he issue a statement in coordination with the British and other Allied governments denouncing the Nazi atrocities. Roosevelt's handwritten note at the bottom orders that the statement be released at

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12:00 noon the next day, “unless previously announced in London.” The statement carefully avoids identifying victims as Jewish, but makes it clear that such actions against innocent civilians “will one day bring fearful retribution.” (Official File 198: Germany, 1941-1943).

## *Document Based Questions*

- 1) What is meant by the term “while practical effects of such a declaration may be slight...”?
- 2) Why do you suppose the declaration was seen as necessary even if it may not have an immediate “practical” effect?
- 3) What is the basic principle of justice that FDR describes in the first paragraph?
- 4) Why do you suppose that FDR says that in their hearts the Nazis know they cannot win?
- 5) Why do you suppose FDR avoided pointing out that it was primarily Jews who were being executed? What do you think might have happened if he did?

## *Document V-H Extension Questions*

- 1) Read and reflect on the statement the President approved and then write 3-4 sentences describing your thoughts and emotions.
- 2) What does FDR mean when he says, “Frightfulness can never bring peace to Europe. It only sows the seeds of hatred which will one day bring fearful retribution”?
- 3) How was the truth of FDR’s statement, quoted in question two above, borne out from the end of the First World War?

## **Document V-I: Eleanor Roosevelt’s Draft “My Day” Column, October 25, 1941**

Although FDR felt politically constrained in the fall of 1941 from clearly identifying victims of Nazi brutality as Jewish, Eleanor Roosevelt felt no such limitations. In this draft of her “My Day” column which appeared in newspapers on October 25, she publicly grapples with the difficult subject of mass deportations of Jews from Germany to Poland and Russia and tries to make the horrors in Europe more relatable to her readers. Admitting that the deportation experience was difficult for Americans to imagine, Eleanor writes, “It would be a kind of leave-taking which could savor somewhat of death. In all partings with people whom we love, there is in a minor way that sense of temporary loss which presages the horrible finality of separation which comes over one at the time of death.” (Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Speech and Article File: My Day Drafts; Box 1432).

## *Document Based Questions*

- 1) What does Mrs. Roosevelt have to say about the role of young people regarding the war?
- 2) What does Mrs. Roosevelt have to say about the role of women, especially British women, regarding the war?
- 3) Why do you suppose Mrs. Roosevelt makes clear that the people who are suffering are Jewish?



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- 4) Mrs. Roosevelt expresses an odd hope when she says, “one can only hope that at a certain point feelings become numb and suffering ceases to be acute.” Is this really something to hope for or does becoming numb to suffering extinguish hope?
- 5) Mrs. Roosevelt compares the experience of being told to leave your home with death. Is this a reasonable comparison?

## *Document V-I Extension Questions*

- 1) Mrs. Roosevelt describes a situation where Jews are “being suddenly told that within an hour you must leave your home never to return again.” How does this compare with what the United States did with Japanese Americans on the West Coast in early 1941?

## **Document V-J: Memorandum for the Secretary's Files, January 16, 1944**

A seminal moment in the Roosevelt Administration's response to the Holocaust was a January 16, 1944, meeting at the White House involving the President, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Treasury's general counsel Randolph Paul, and Morgenthau's assistant John W. Pehle. At this meeting, Secretary Morgenthau presented to the President a lengthy and blunt “Personal Report” on what Morgenthau and other Treasury officials believed to be the State Department's acquiescence in Germany's mass murder of Jews. The startling evidence presented to the President of the State Department's incompetence, delay, and even obstruction of a variety of rescue efforts convinced him of the need to establish an independent commission to coordinate rescue and relief efforts. This contemporaneous memorandum was written by John Pehle, who attended the meeting and who would become the first Director of the War Refugee Board, which FDR established by executive order several days later. (Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Book 694, Pages 190-192).

## *Document Based Questions*

- 1) How did the problem with the State Department's unwillingness to help Jewish Refugees become known in the Treasury Department?
- 2) What documents were used as evidence to convince President Roosevelt that the State Department was not doing what it was supposed to do regarding Jewish Refugees?
- 3) What example is given to FDR to suggest that effective action could be taken regarding helping Jews escape?
- 4) How did FDR respond to the suggestion that Breckinridge Long was being uncooperative in helping the Jewish Refugees?
- 5) What argument did FDR use as a possible explanation for Long's reluctance to assist the Jews?
- 6) How was Roosevelt's argument that many Jews who were allowed to enter the United States in the past turned out to be “bad” and problematic refuted? What was the actual number used?
- 7) What other example is given of Breckinridge Long's poor performance at the State Department?

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- 8) Why do you suppose such a pointed meeting concerning this issue had not been held sooner?
- 9) What action did FDR take once he was convinced of the problem with the actions of the State Department?

## *Document V-J Extension Questions*

- 1) Why did it take so long for this matter to reach the President? If the meeting had occurred without the information regarding spending from the Treasury Department, how do you suppose President Roosevelt would have responded?
- 2) What does this situation say about information and communication in, and around, the White House during the Roosevelt Administration? How does it compare with other administrations?
- 3) In 2018 and 2019 reports that officials within the government were secretly working against the President's agenda surfaced; how do these compare to the situation in the Roosevelt White House and Administration?

## **Document V-K:** *Statement by the President Regarding Atrocities of War, March 24, 1944*

As the number and ferocity of wartime atrocities increased, President Roosevelt believed it necessary to issue another, more forceful statement condemning Nazi and Japanese brutalities, and specifically mentioning the mass murder of European Jews. In the statement, Roosevelt made it clear that Allied victory was inevitable and that all those responsible for these horrific crimes against humanity would be brought to justice. The statement was issued on March 24, 1944. In order to insure its penetration into German-controlled territories, it was printed in many languages and dropped as leaflets, and the British Broadcasting Company relayed the statement in many languages to enemy and occupied countries. This particular draft of the statement was filed in the White House files on April 3, 1944. (President's Personal File 1-F: Press Releases-Drafts, 1944, Box 18).

## *Document Based Questions*

- 1) The statement uses the term "United Nations" instead of the term "Allied Forces." Why is this significant?
- 2) What are the principles outlined in the statement for which the United Nations are fighting?
- 3) To whom do you suppose this message is intended?
- 4) What crimes or conditions are listed and described as being perpetrated by the Axis powers?
- 5) What specific act against the Jews of Europe does the statement call out for the record?
- 6) What do you suppose the "United Nations" are trying to accomplish by putting the world on notice that the acts being perpetrated by the Nazis and the Japanese will be punished?



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## *Document V-K Extension Questions*

- 1) Why does this very strong statement come so late in the war?
- 2) How well does this statement align with the goals of the Nuremberg Trials?
- 3) How well does the lesson that individuals will be held accountable for crimes perpetrated during war seem to have taken hold in today's world?
- 4) When does Roosevelt first begin to think of the Allies as the "United Nations"?

## **Document V-L:** *Letter, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy to John W. Pehle, July 4, 1944*

One of the most controversial aspects of the Roosevelt Administration's reaction to the Holocaust is the decision not to bomb rail lines used to transport prisoners to Auschwitz. As early as March 1943, requests for bombing of Hitler's instruments of death had reached various government officials from Jewish sources both at home and abroad. The Administration was reluctant to take such action, though, because of the danger of the raids also killing the prisoners they were meant to save as well as of the practicality of diverting military resources that were needed elsewhere to defeat Germany. In 1944, War Refugee Board Director John W. Pehle made several direct appeals to the War Department for the bombing of various camps and rail lines. This July 4, 1944, letter from Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy to Pehle – written one month after the D-Day invasion of Northwest Europe – states the military's position with regard to such suggestions, and reflects Roosevelt's belief that the surest way to end the killing was to defeat Nazi Germany as quickly as possible. (War Refugee Board Records; Projects and Documents File; Measures Directed Toward Halting Persecutions; Hungary No. 5, Box 42).

## *Document Based Questions*

- 1) How was the deportation of the Jewish population from Hungary to Poland confirmed?
- 2) How were the Jewish deportees treated in the weeks and months leading up to their deportation?
- 3) What were conditions like for the deportees during the actual transportation?
- 4) What fate awaited the deportees at the end of their forced journey?
- 5) How many Jews were being deported according to this particular report?

## *Documents V-L Extension Questions*

- 1) Mr. Pehle says in a parenthetical phrase on page two, "This is submitted by me as a proposal of these agencies and I can venture no opinion on its utility." Given the vast numbers being deported; the conditions under which it is happening; the known fate that awaits at the end of their deportation journey; and the certainty of the information, shouldn't some form of disruption of this operation have been attempted?
- 2) Clearly the Hungarians, working under Nazi orders, were intent on moving and destroying the Jewish population under their control. Given this fact would bombing the rail lines have really prevented them on carrying on with their gruesome task?

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## What Actions did Roosevelt Take Leading Up To The War?

Below is a brief timeline of actions taken by the Roosevelt Administration in the lead up to the Second World War. While official policy was that the United States was neutral in the escalating conflict in Europe, FDR's actions clearly show he understood the threat the Nazis posed to the world.

September 11, 1939	President Roosevelt begins a secret correspondence with England's Winston Churchill.
November 4, 1939	America's Neutrality Acts are loosened to permit "cash and carry" sales of US weapons to warring nations.
September 2, 1940	FDR completes a deal to give 50 old destroyers to Britain in exchange for leases to British Bases in the Atlantic.
September 16, 1940	FDR signs the Selective Service Act – creating America's first peacetime draft.
September 26, 1940	The United States bans the sale of iron, steel, and gasoline to Japan, Germany's ally.
December 29, 1940	FDR announces that the United States will be the world's "arsenal of democracy."
January 6, 1941	FDR proposes the Lend-Lease bill to Congress. It is passed in March.
January 24, 1941	Secret American – British military staff talks begin in Washington.
May 27, 1941	Citing the growing Axis threat in Europe, FDR declares an "unlimited national emergency."
June 14, 1941	German and Italian assets in the United States are frozen.
July 9, 1941	FDR directs the military to create the "Victory Program" a comprehensive plan of the resources needed to defeat our potential enemies.
September 11, 1941	In response to a Nazi attack on the America destroyer USS Greer, FDR announces that the US would no longer wait for German submarines to fire first – the press labels it a "shoot on site" policy.
December 8, 1941	In response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States declares war on Japan, Germany's ally.
January 1, 1942	The United States and 25 other nations sign the United Nations declaration pledging to fight and defeat the Nazis.



## The Roosevelt Administration: Actions and Inaction

December 17, 1942

The United States and ten Allied nations issue a solemn public declaration condemning Nazi Germany's "bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination of the Jews."

January 22, 1944

Roosevelt established the War Refugee Board to coordinate efforts to rescue those who might be saved.

April 12, 1945

Franklin Roosevelt dies of a stroke in Warm Springs, Georgia.

