

## **Syllabus: The Holocaust Refugee Crisis**

**Instructor: Victor Menco Haeckermann**

“When I visit Poland and walk through the concentration camp, I wonder why, in those times, there was not an Israel where I could go.” Aliza Landau<sup>1</sup>

### **Overview**

The International Labor Office estimated that, between September 1939 and the end of 1943, there were thirty million displaced people in Europe (Kulischer 1943). Among them, there were millions of Jews. It is not coincidental that, within this period, one of the most shameful episodes in the history of humanitarian aid took place: The story of the voyage of the St. Louis still resonates in many governmental, academic, humanitarian, and Jewish circles. Six years after the Holocaust, the United Nations created its refugee designation in 1951. This was a measure by the international community to commit to aiding refugees due to the complicity of many countries in the Nazi persecution of European Jews. By exploring the moral lessons from the Holocaust refugee crisis, students can apply historical knowledge to understanding the role of survivors in the founding of the state of Israel, current instances of antisemitism, and other recent refugee crises.

### **Context**

In 1938, a year before the MS St. Louis incident, the German Jews experienced the *Kristallnacht*, also called the “Night of Broken Glass.” It constituted a turning point in the primarily nonviolent measures of the Nazi regime against its Jewish citizens. Incited by the Nazi Government, the destruction of Jewish-owned stores, Jewish-related buildings and homes, and synagogues on November 9–10, was perpetrated by the Nazi Party's paramilitary forces with the support of lots of average German citizens. Close to 100 Jews were killed in the rampage. Following the *Kristallnacht*, some 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps.

By 1939, the atrocities against German Jews encouraged or perpetrated by the Nazis increased to a point where they sought ways to leave Europe. Suffice it to say that 2 million Jews had been exterminated by that time (USHMM 2014). Back then, the exact number of victims was not known worldwide, but intelligence communities, leaders and citizens of the allies, especially in the United States, had repudiated Hitler's repressive and genocidal measures against the German Jews. The Nuremberg Laws did not make German citizens of non-German blood officially ‘stateless.’ However, these new policies considered German Jews as ‘subjects’ and thus eligible to lose their nationality if they were found ‘undesirable’ for the Nazi interests, a process with no proper trial. Therefore, “The mass exodus from Germany, although technically voluntary, was in fact a forced emigration” (Vishniak 1945, 24). Once abroad, Jews usually lost their German citizenship and became stateless.

With Cuba as a destination country, the German luxury liner St. Louis seemed a lifesaver for some Jewish refugees who could afford the high costs. This clearly was a privilege, considering that

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<sup>1</sup> Landau, Aliza. “If Only Night Would Not Come – The Story of Aliza Landau” (Presentation via Zoom), ISGAP- OXFORD Summer Institute for Curriculum Development in Critical Antisemitism Studies, August 5, 2021.

German Jews had lost their livelihoods after the repressive policies passed in Nazi Germany from 1933 on. In addition, the Cuban chief of immigration, also wanted to benefit from the despair of the refugees by demanding an additional \$500 fee for the disembarkation of each passenger. Of the 937 refugees aboard, the vast majority of them Jewish, the Cuban government admitted only 28 passengers who met the requirements. It invalidated most of the passengers' travel papers, bowing to popular prejudices that portrayed refugees as job competitors and criminals. In the same vein, both the U.S. and the Canadian governments, using immigration quotas as an excuse, also rejected the refugees' request for help. Even factions within Jewish committees in the US, opposed the admittance of Jewish refugees to the then British-controlled Palestine. Finally, the vessel was forced to return to Europe, where 255 of its passengers are believed to have been killed.

What were the motives behind the attitude of the states involved? Why was help from the international community so limited? Why did Holocaust refugees, descendants of Jews that lived in ancient Israel, encounter such opposition to their return as a community to their ancestral land?

The St. Louis incident still resonates because the current humanitarian crisis, whether involving Jews or other peoples, remains unresolved by the international community. Moreover, the Holocaust refugee crisis serves at an entrance point to understand and initiate conversations around the conflicts between Israel and other countries and groups in the Middle East.

By mid-2020, the number of persons forcibly displaced passed 80 million (UNHCR 2020). To help students think about possible societal and individual responses to immigration and refugee crises that the world faces nowadays, these units aim to study how the refugee crisis caused by the Holocaust is a starting point of modern instances of them. This approach serves as an example of how the past can contribute to finding moral lessons for the future beyond the classroom.

## **Bibliography**

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## Objectives

- Understand the systematic antisemitic measures against Jews in Germany and other countries across Europe occupied by the Nazis and how they evolved into international antisemitism.
- Evaluate how the rest of the world responded to the Holocaust-related refugee crisis — with particular attention to the US.
- Review the perspectives on the establishment of the state of Israel as a national self-determination right for Jews and Jewish refugees.
- Extract the lessons that the analysis of this crisis offers for collective and individual actions aimed to help refugees in contemporary and future contexts.
- Compare the concepts ‘refugee’ vs. ‘displaced person’ and ‘silent collaborator’ vs. ‘bystander.’

## Key Information

- The syllabus is intended for senior students in college.
- These units are designed for students that have some knowledge on World War II and the Nazi regime.
- A review of the historical context is provided at the beginning of the course. Activities to develop knowledge and critical thinking take place in the classroom, and homework activities reinforce the assimilation of practical knowledge.

## Materials

Block, M. & Scolovsky, J. “Antisemitism Spikes, And Many Jews Wonder: Where Are Our Allies?” *NPR*, June 2021.

CBC News: "The National. MS St. Louis Holocaust Survivor on Canada's Apology," November 7, 2018. News video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nEpwvxHD08g>

Dwork, Debórah & van Pelt, Robert Jan. *Flight from the Reich: Refugee Jews, 1933-1946*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

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Fishman, Sylvia Barack. "Erasure and Demonization: Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism in Contemporary Social Movements." In Natan Sharansky (ed.), *Occasional Paper Series* (no. 1), 1-27. ISGAP: Oxford, UK; New York, NY; Rome; Toronto; Jerusalem: ISGAP, 2021.

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Herzl, Theodor, Sylvie d' Avigdor, Jacob M. Alkow, and Alex Bein. *The Jewish state: an attempt at a modern solution of the Jewish question*. New York, NY: American Zionist Emergency Council, 1946.

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Navon, Emmanuel. *The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2020.

Rudee, Eliana. "Argentinian journalist exposes antisemitic, neo-Nazi groups in Latin America," *Israel Hayom*, April, 2001. <https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/04/14/argentinian-journalist-exposes-antisemitic-neo-nazi-groups-in-latin-america/>

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USHMM. "Refugees: Gerda Blachmann Wilchfort," 1989. Educational video. [https://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/personal-history/media\\_oi.php?MediaId=1135](https://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/personal-history/media_oi.php?MediaId=1135)

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Week	Thematic Sections	Main reading
Week 1	Nazi antisemitism and the Holocaust refugee crisis (refugee history in relation to the Holocaust).	Dwork, Debórah & van Pelt, Robert Jan. <i>Flight from the Reich: Refugee Jews, 1933-1946</i> . New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.
Week 2	Terminology	<p>Gerson, Judith M. "In Cuba I was a German Shepherd: Questions of Comparison and Generalizability." In Judith M. Gerson and Diane L. Wolf, <i>Sociology Confronts the Holocaust: Memories and Identities in Jewish Diasporas, Generalizability in Holocaust Memoirs</i>, 119-120. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.</p> <p>Vishniak, Mark. <i>The Legal Status of Stateless Persons</i>. New York: Research Institute on Peace and Post-War Problems of the American Jewish Committee. 1945.</p>
Week 3	"ONLOOKERS: Why Such Limited Help from Outside?"	<p>Hayes, Peter. "ONLOOKERS: Why Such Limited Help from Outside?" In <i>Why?: Explaining the Holocaust</i>, 259-299. New York &amp; London: W. W. Norton &amp; Company, 2017.</p> <p>Facing History &amp; Ourselves. "A Refugee Crisis." accessed August 05, 2021.</p>
Week 4	The role of the Holocaust in the foundation of the state of Israel	<p>Herzl, Theodor, Sylvie d' Avigdor, Jacob M. Alkow, and Alex Bein. <i>The Jewish state: an attempt at a modern solution of the Jewish question</i>. New York: American Zionist Emergency Council, 1946.</p> <p>Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Declaration of Establishment of the State of Israel," 2013.</p>
Week 5	Jewish diasporas and Zionism	Navon, Emmanuel. <i>The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel</i> . Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2020.
Week 6	Current instances of antisemitism	Block, M. & Scolovsky, J. <i>Antisemitism Spikes, And Many Jews Wonder: Where Are Our Allies?</i> <i>NPR</i> , June 2021.

		<p>Rudee, Eliana. "Argentinian journalist exposes antisemitic, neo-Nazi groups in Latin America," Israel Hayom, April, 2001.</p> <p>Fishman, Sylvia Barack. "Erasure and Demonization: Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism in Contemporary Social Movements." In Natan Sharansky (ed.), <i>Occasional Paper Series</i> (no. 1). ISGAP: Oxford, UK; New York, NY; Rome; Toronto; Jerusalem: ISGAP, 2021.</p>
Week 7	Current instances of refugee crises	<p>UNHCR. "Forced displacement passes 80 million by mid-2020 as COVID-19 tests refugee protection globally". December 09, 2020. Accessed July 06, 2021.</p> <p>Facing History &amp; Ourselves. "The Importance of Humanizing Refugees," 2016. Educational video.</p>
Week 8	Humanitarian institutions created after the Holocaust refugee crisis	<p>Kulischer, Eugene M. <i>The Displacement of Population in Europe</i>. Montreal: The International Labour Office, 1943.</p>