

Topic:

Antisemitism and Discrimination against Jewish immigrants in the United States

Description:

Leading up to the Second World War, antisemitism was prevalent throughout America. Many people held incredibly negative views and ideas about Jewish people, and there was an abundance of stereotypes regarding Judaism and its followers seen in the media. Stereotypes about Jewish people ranged from certain physical characteristics considered to be “undesirable”, to the idea that Jewish people ran the world and hoarded money. These opinions and falsities were not regarded as large issues and were brushed off by many. A librarian, Florence Mendheim, from New York City decided that she could not brush off the mistreatment Jewish people like her faced. Mendheim went undercover in 1933 to collect information about antisemitic and Nazi-sympathizing groups in America. Under the alias of Gertrude Mueller, she began to associate herself with the Friends of the New Germany. Mendheim was able to save and collect anti-Jewish propaganda and news media that this group and others like it distributed.¹ Throughout the 1930s, Mendheim gathered information from many New York City Nazi-associated groups, risking herself so that she could help prevent the spread of these antisemitic ideologies. Florence Mendheim also focused on gathering print media from other organizations—both Jewish and non-Jewish—who fought against the spread of antisemitism and for Civil Rights and equality in America. Decades later, Florence Mendheim’s story was told, and she was commended for her work in helping preserve anti-Jewish print media by the Center for Jewish History and The Leo Baeck Institute, both of which have exhibits based on her work.

Although many individuals like Florence Mendheim attempted to combat antisemitism in the United States during the 1930s and 40s, many Americans continued to believe that Jewish people were the source of a multitude of the nation’s problems. A study done by the National Opinion Research Center in January of 1943 showed that 49.7 percent of Americans believed that Jewish people had too much influence in the business world of the United States.² Although antisemitism and the ideologies that Anti-Semites distributed were not new then, organizations

¹ Gemma Solomons, The NYPL Librarian Who Spied on the Nazis, The Center for Jewish History March 19, 2019.

² Erskine, Hazel Gaudet. “The Polls: Religious Prejudice, Part 2: Anti-Semitism.” The Public Opinion Quarterly 29, no. 4 (1965): 662. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747042>.

such as the Friends of New Germany and the German-American Bund perpetuated these ideologies publicly through camps and rallies. These prejudiced opinions quickly spread and spiraled into different, more harmful stereotypes. The theories that Jewish people ran the world and were the root of America's problems continued to spread throughout the media and across the country throughout the Second World War. These ideologies were perpetuated and distributed by organizations like the one Florence Mendheim infiltrated. The German-American Bund was a well-known organization that fostered Nazi ideologies and attempted to replicate Hitler's youth camps that popped up throughout Europe in the 1930s. Created to spread Nazi ideologies, these camps promoted antisemitism within America and urged for the support of Adolf Hitler's Germany.³

The hatred that many people had toward Judaism and its followers prior to the Holocaust was both individual and systemic. Antisemitism was so widespread leading up to the Second World War that it was not a hot button issue within the media and largely remained unspoken and unreported until after the Holocaust. Jewish people have continued to be one of the most persecuted groups in recorded history. People of Jewish ethnicity and religious affiliation have been used as scapegoats for centuries, for events such as the Black Death, to financial crashes, and the World Wars. These are just some of the many ways that Jewish people have been blamed for various kinds of problems throughout the world. This is no different when it comes to American history. Throughout American history, Jewish people have been seen as different from other Americans due to their religious beliefs. Stemming from the Christian roots of America, antisemitism had become so common by the Interwar years that many people did not believe it to be a controversial affair.⁴ This continued until the end of the Second World War when Americans widely understood and accepted news about how Jewish people were being treated in German-occupied Europe. Due to the atrocities committed and the genocide of millions of Jewish people during the Holocaust, antisemitism in America decreased, and became more widely condemned.

The ways in which antisemitism had been written about in the first half of the 20th century suggest that before World War II, antisemitism was not yet vilified in a fashion that

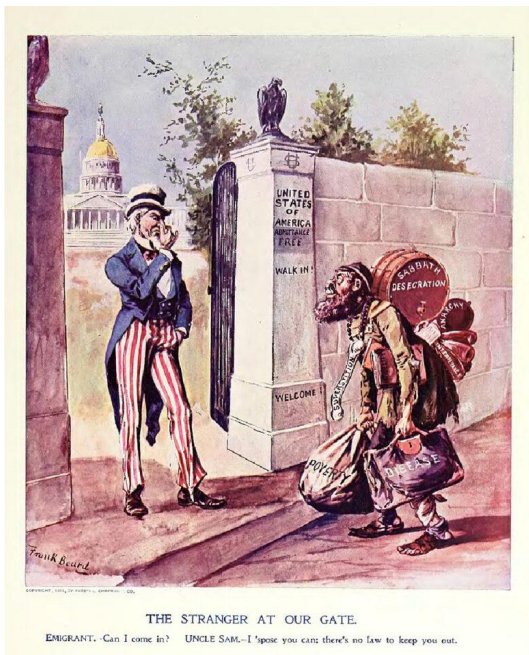
³ "World War II Informational Fact Sheet," World War II Informational Fact Sheet (Washington, D.C.: United States Government, 1991).

⁴ Kenneth L. Marcus, *Jewish Identity and Civil Rights in America* (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). P 29

pushed for any systemic change. Antisemitism was normalized to the point that it took large hate groups and widespread media footage of an international genocide for people to question the morality and legality of antisemitism, and attempt to change Jewish people were treated in the United States.

Primary Documents:

- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23882007> Jewish Caricature Throughout History
- <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2747042> Statistics about Antisemitism in America
- <https://express.adobe.com/page/xsX0z3D9lMyq1/> Letters from the Public about opening a Jewish Refugee Camp in Oswego New York (During World War II)
- <https://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pha/misc/World%20War%20II%20Fact%20Sheets.pdf> World War II Informational Fact Sheet
- <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/anti-semitism-and-jewish-views-on-discrimination/> Survey of Jewish People about Antisemitism (2021)
- Gilded Age



- World War II Era (1938-1942)



- https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1959/05/19/89198609.pdf?pdf_redirect=true&ip=0

Teaching strategies/Guiding Questions:

How has discrimination changed since the beginning of the United State?

In what ways has anti semitism affected Jewish Culture?

What Forms Does Antisemitism Take and Where Does It Show Up?

How can we spot antisemitism, prejudice and anti-Jewish stereotypes?

After looking at the Caricatures of Jewish people, what do you know about how Jewish people were perceived at each of these times?

Lesson Plan on separate Document

Document Based Question:

Considering the Documents that we investigated and read, How has the representation of Jewish people and culture in the Media changed and developed since the Gilded age?

Extra Sources:

- <https://www.jta.org/archive/columbia-campus-in-arms-against-mysterious-nazis> Jewish Telegraph Agency, this article talks about Nazi sympathizers on Columbia University's campus. "The Archive of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency includes articles published from 1923 to 2008. Archive stories reflect the journalistic standards and practices of the time they were published."
- https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1959/05/19/89198609.pdf?pdf_redirect=true&ip=0 The New York Times Machine allows students to access every issue of the New York Times from 1851 to 2002. This is just one article that would be helpful for further research
- <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/morgenthauptproject> Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library
- <https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/life-in-nazi-occupied-europe/oppresion/anti-semitic-laws/>
- <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/americans-and-the-holocaust/topics/what-americans-knew> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
- <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/us-government-turned-away-thousands-jewish-refugees-fearing-they-were-nazi-spies-180957324/> Smithsonian discusses the one group of Jewish Refugees that were allowed in America.
- https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/AboutUs/CivilSociety/ReportHC/75_The_Louis_D._Brandeis_Center_Fact_Sheet_Anti-Semitism.pdf

Books:

- Marjorie Morningstar By Herman Wouk
- A Rosenberg by Any Other Name:A History of Jewish Name Changing in America By Kirsten Fermaglich
- White Ethnic New York By Joshua Zeitz
- American Antisemitism By Leonard Dinnerstein