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Rhymes of Silence: Isolationism Then and Now

In the years before and during World War II, the world watched as Nazi Germany spread terror across Europe. Jewish people and other persecuted groups faced systematic extermination. Nations had a choice: act or stand by. The United States hesitated. Despite mounting evidence of atrocities, its leaders failed to take action. Restrictive immigration policies, isolationist rhetoric, and muted media coverage stalled an active response. In the past, when the United States finally intervened, it was too late for millions. This hesitation demonstrated how waiting too long could cause problems in future foreign policy decisions.

During World War II, the United States immigration policy functioned as a steady stream of intentional roadblocks for Jews seeking refuge. Kurt Levi, a lawyer from Wiesbaden, Germany, spent years navigating changing legal and political conditions across Europe (Center for Holocaust Education). His attempts to resettle in Switzerland, Palestine, and South Africa all failed due to tightened export laws, antisemitic policies, or shifting visa requirements. Although the United States remained his number one choice, it was not his number one option. He eventually entered on a short-term visa and rerouted through Havana, stalled for months by a minor paperwork discrepancy. Fortunately, after countless obstacles, Mr. Levi gained entry to the United States, settled in New York, and lived to tell his story.

Another case that reflects how the United States immigration policy affected individual lives is that of Frank Cohn, a Jewish teenager who left Germany with his family in 1938. His father had immigrated earlier and was able to secure affidavits for the rest of the family just

before restrictions became more severe. They arrived in New York before the war began. Cohn later joined the United States Army and returned to Europe as part of the Allied effort. His story shows that the system still allowed some people in—but only if they had the right documents and applied before policies changed (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). After 1939, it became much harder to meet the legal requirements, even for those facing the same threats. Cohn's case was not typical; most families were denied or delayed, often with no explanation. His experience highlights the gap between what the system allowed and what people actually needed. The government could have admitted more refugees. It looked the other way. In the end, who got out often came down to timing and paperwork, not danger or urgency. Cohn's story reminds us that the United States immigration policy did not fail because the system was overwhelmed. It failed by design.

Indeed, others were not so lucky. A mother, Fanny Valfer, described her situation in a letter to relatives from southwest France, saying, "We have become beggars… I still cannot grasp that we have become so poor and helpless… my eyes hurt from crying," following their expulsion from Germany and subsequent denial by the United States (Max and Fanny Valfer). Just weeks later, in August 1942, they were transferred to the Drancy transit camp near Paris. From there, on August 19, 1942, they were deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered.

The State Department Memo on Temporarily Halting Immigration (State Department Memo on Temporarily Halting Immigration | DocsTeach) from June 1940 shows they were actively trying to limit access to the United States for Jewish immigrants. In the document, Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, a prominent figure in maintaining tight immigration laws, revealed, "We could do this by simply advising our consuls to put every obstacle in the way and to require additional evidence and to resort to various administrative

devices which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas" (Memo from Assistant Secretary of State to State Department Officials on Temporarily Halting Immigration into the United States). This act was a prime example of the intentional difficulties imposed on Jews by the United States government, suggesting at least implicit alignment with Nazi antisemitism, a belief deeply rooted in American society (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC).

In early 1944, a senior official in the Treasury Department sent a memo to the State Department referring to "the acquiescence of this government in the murder of the Jews." The author observed that "[s]ince 1940, the State Department, under the leadership of Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, had been using a variety of tactics to limit the numbers of refugees who could enter the United States as immigrants" ("Acquiescence' Memo | DocsTeach"). The issues raised in the memo and the subsequent policy shifts influenced post-war discussions on immigration and refugee policies, contributing to changes in the following decades.

Outspoken isolationists bear some responsibility for the horrors of the Holocaust. For example, the famous American aviator, Charles Lindbergh, advocated for staying on the sidelines, espousing the strategy to avoid a second costly war. However, isolation came at a different cost: the death of millions at the hands of a genocidal regime. Supporters of intervention aimed at the isolationists. Dr. Seuss, a celebrated cartoonist who supported joining the war, created the political cartoon, "Since When Did We Swap Our Ego for an Ostrich?" in 1941 (Since When Did We Swap Our Ego for an Ostrich?). The cartoon pictures a quarter coin with an ostrich, whose head is buried in the sand, with a caption that states, "Lindbergh Quarter" ("Dr. Seuss Political Cartoons"). The scale of the Holocaust and the moral implications of the

inaction of the United States prompted a reevaluation of foreign policy, with growing public support for international engagement, including joining the United Nations and later NATO. As Walter Russell Mead explains, World War II made many Americans realize that staying out of world problems didn't work—and that it was immoral to ignore the actions of inhumane and dangerous governments (Special Providence).

Beyond government policies obstructing Jewish immigration to the United States and respected isolationist voices, the media obscured the problem. Between 1939 and 1943, the peak of the Holocaust, newspapers published tens of thousands of articles about the war in Europe. Of these papers, very few succeeded in picturing the true scale of the atrocities. For example, Buffalo Courier Express, in 1943, reported, "Little Evidence Supports Story of Nazi Atrocity" as a headline for a news story regarding a mass shooting of roughly 80,000 people outside Kyiv. This headline drastically understated what was a well-documented massacre ("Newspapers: Buffalo Courier Express").

In 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order decreeing that the government would "take all measures within its power to rescue the victims of enemy oppression who are in imminent danger and otherwise to afford such victims all possible relief and assistance consistent with the successful prosecution of the war" ("Executive Order Establishing a War Refugee Board | DocsTeach"). The War Refugee Board's first director, John Pehle, described the policy as "little and late," due to its timing in 1944, toward the end of the war. Unfortunately, this late in the war, approximately 85% of European Jews had been massacred as a result of American passivity (Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution).

The United States failed to take sufficient action to aid Jewish people during World War II. Instead, restrictive immigration policies, prolonged neutrality, and insufficient media coverage of Nazi atrocities contributed to the lack of intervention. Additionally, legal loopholes, institutional anti-Semitism, and policy decisions at the time provided indirect support to Nazi Germany. In some cases, political and economic considerations, such as the delayed enforcement of sanctions, further enabled the regime's war efforts. Unfortunately, all of these tactics are still relevant and used today.

In a quip famously attributed to Mark Twain, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." The United States' reluctance to intervene in the Holocaust was based solely on isolationism, anti-immigrant sentiment, political caution, and media neglect. Many of those factors remain applicable in contemporary political life. Lessons from the past provide a reminder that inaction, hiding behind pragmatism, becomes a form of action—irresponsibility rather than defense of innocent lives. If we apply our lesson to today's world, then the United States has a responsibility not to hide behind closed borders or red tape. Refugee crises in places like Palestine, Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza, Syria, and Afghanistan demand more than faux diplomatic gestures—they require open pathways, material support, and political will, all circumvented by the greed of human nature and the same vices that prevented humanitarian aid during the Holocaust. In this case, silence is more than just violence; it is the death of millions. History reminds us that impartiality is not impartial; neutrality is not neutral. Using our agency not to act, especially when we have the capacity to help, is a choice with serious consequences. The next time we see history start to rhyme, we need to write a different story.

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