

The background features a stylized American flag with a blue field of white stars at the top and red and white vertical stripes below. Several white, hand-drawn silhouettes of hands are raised against the stripes. The text is centered over the stripes.

**UNPACKING
THE U.S. AND THE
HOLOCAUST**



This toolkit is designed for viewers to engage with PBS's series ***The U.S. and the Holocaust***. The following sections correspond to each of the series' three episodes. Participants will be asked to reflect on the past as a way of considering the challenges that democracies face today, and our responsibilities as citizens of the world. This toolkit can be used as a companion for viewers after each episode or as a discussion guide after viewing the documentary in its entirety.

Ways to approach complex material

- **Take frequent breaks** to check in with one another.
- **Make space for other people's experiences.** We all come to this documentary from different places and perspectives. Let's keep that in mind while engaging in these exercises.
- **Emoting is OK.** There is no right or wrong emotional response to what you've just watched.

THE GOLDEN DOOR

The U.S. and the Holocaust follows America's response to one of the worst calamities in world history. We learned that the rise of Nazism did not immediately mobilize a large-scale American call to action to help Jews and other persecuted groups in Germany. In the aftermath of World War I, the United States was deeply isolationist and experienced its own backlash to open-door immigration policies. There were other factors, too, like antisemitism, xenophobia, the Great Depression, and bureaucratic indifference. All of these tempered American willingness to provide a safe haven for hundreds of thousands of desperate Jews seeking to flee Nazi-controlled areas of Europe.



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*Immigrants at Ellis Island, New York.
Between 1902-1913.
Source: The New York Public Library*



This section, which corresponds with Episode One of the series, invites you to explore what it means to be a “nation of immigrants” and how Americans in the 1920s and 1930s saw their country’s place in the world.

Please discuss and answer the questions below.

How did Americans’ own fears and prejudices impact the U.S. response to Nazism?

Why did the United States sharply restrict immigration following World War I?

What role did antisemitism and other prejudices play in closing the “Golden Door”?

In the 1930s, Nazi discrimination against Jews—including beatings, anti-Jewish laws, and Kristallnacht—was widely reported in the United States.

How did press coverage of these events affect American public opinion and public willingness to intervene?

Some Americans feared that protesting against the Nazis could lead to further persecution of Jews in Germany—or a rise in antisemitism in the United States.

Despite these fears, some did take action. What strategies did ordinary Americans take to protest Nazi antisemitic policies?



Pro-Nazi meeting or rally. A sign in the back reads "Kauft nicht bei Juden" (Don't Buy from Jews). Circa 1933-1934. Source: National Archives and Records Administration

**“WHAT IS HAPPENING IN
GERMANY TODAY MAY HAPPEN
TOMORROW IN ANY OTHER
LAND ON EARTH UNLESS IT IS
CHALLENGED AND REBUKED.”**

—RABBI STEPHEN WISE



SCAN THE QR CODE to learn more from the
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.



YEARNING TO BREATHE FREE

During the 1930s, restrictive immigration policies in the United States limited avenues of escape for European Jews seeking refuge in America. But even after the horrors of Kristallnacht made headlines in the United States, these policies persisted. This exercise corresponds to the series' second episode, which explores the American political climate leading up to Pearl Harbor and America's formal involvement in World War II. Participants will discuss how Nazi antisemitic violence increased, and the power that a piece of paper—a simple visa or passport—can have in determining survival.



UNPACKING THE U.S.
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Affidavit in lieu of passport issued by
Hiram Bingham (U.S. Vice Consul in
Marseilles, France), Circa 1941.
Source: United States Holocaust
Memorial Museum

Americans were largely united in their disapproval of German policies but often divided on whether, and how, to respond.

What challenges did American political leaders, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, face in mobilizing public support for rescuing Jews and other persecuted peoples in Nazi-controlled Europe?

As the war in Europe spread, how did fears over national security impact U.S. immigration policy?

For a refugee, possession of the proper documents can mean the difference between life and death.

How do the stories of some of the individuals featured in this episode—Günther Stern, Susi and Joseph Hilsenrath, and Otto Frank and his family—illustrate the impact of bureaucratic decisions and the protective power of citizenship?

The tragic story of the MS St. Louis has become an infamous example of inaction.

What factors made it difficult for the American government to intervene?

What challenges did the refugees on board the St. Louis face?

*Franklin D. Roosevelt in Washington, DC, November 9, 1943.
Source: National Archives and Records Administration*

**“THESE PEOPLE ARE NOW
STATISTICS... BUT THEY WERE
NOT STATISTICS TO THEMSELVES.
EVERY ONE OF THEM DIED IN A
DIFFERENT WAY.”**

—DANIEL MENDELSON,
*author of *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million**

THE HOMELESS, TEMPEST-TOSSED

By the time the United States formally entered the war in late 1941, the mass murder of European Jews had already begun. This exercise, which corresponds to Episode Three, will explore how the first reports of the Holocaust were handled by the press, and examine the public's difficulty in grappling with evidence of these horrific events.



**UNPACKING THE U.S.
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*Jews captured during the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising are marched to a holding area prior to deportation. Warsaw, Poland, 1943.
Source: National Archives and Records Administration*



More than one million Jews had already been killed by December 1941, when the United States entered World War II.

When did the American public first begin to learn about the mass murder of European Jews? How did skepticism about some of the first reports affect public response?

In January 1944, the War Refugee Board, a new agency in the United States government, was tasked with trying to rescue European Jews.

What factors led to the creation of the War Refugee Board?

How did the war affect the opportunities for rescue?

Looking back to look forward.

What were some lessons you learned in Episode Three that can guide our responses to refugee crises and genocide today?

Has the film changed your view of the role of the United States in the world and its responsibility to intervene in crises abroad? If so, how?

During crises, what are the responsibilities of our leaders to shape public opinion rather than follow it?

What does this history tell us about the role of individuals to act when governments fail to intervene?



Rabbi Stephen Wise addresses a crowd at a rally outside Madison Square Garden, New York, June 1944. Source: Library of Congress



**“WE DO RALLY, AS A NATION,
TO DEFEAT FASCISM. WE JUST
DON’T RALLY, AS A NATION,
TO RESCUE THE VICTIMS
OF FASCISM.”**

—DANIEL GREENE, HISTORIAN

THE MAKING OF THE U.S. AND THE HOLOCAUST

The U.S. and the Holocaust was co-directed by Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and Sarah Botstein. Below is an interview with Sarah Botstein about the making of their film.



From top: Co-directors Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and Sarah Botstein listen to advisers during a script meeting.

Günther "Guy" Stern is interviewed by Lynn Novick.

Interviewee Susan Warsinger and Lynn Novick.



UNPACKING THE U.S.
AND THE HOLOCAUST

What was the pre-production process for *The U.S. and the Holocaust*?

Sarah Botstein: One of the first things we always do is identify scholars to be advisers to the series. We work closely with them the whole way through production.

Your production and post-production were impacted by Covid. How?

We shoot the whole time we're editing, so we don't have separate shooting, scripting, and editing schedules. When the pandemic hit, we were beginning to edit and film a lot of live cinematography. We had plans to film in locations in Ukraine and Poland that were important to the series and we couldn't go ourselves.

We were fortunate to meet an extraordinary team of Polish cinematographers, filmmakers, and producers who filmed during 2020 and 2021 at memorial sites like Auschwitz and Treblinka and again in Bolechow, where Daniel Mendelsohn's family is from, now present-day Ukraine. Those places, to my mind, appear even more hallowed and interesting because they were empty due to Covid.

We also did three significant interviews at the height of the pandemic, the first of which was with Daniel Mendelsohn's mother, Marlene, who was in her nineties. It was the first time any of us had been tested for Covid, and we had masks and fans.



Cinematographer Wojciech Staroń while filming at the Treblinka memorial in Poland.



How did you score the film?

For many years, we have had the privilege of working with Johnny Gandelsman, who is an extraordinary violinist in his own right. Normally we bring the musicians into a studio and ask them to think about themes and subjects in the film we're making and then react and play. But we couldn't do that this time because of Covid. Johnny and his enormously talented group of musicians recorded in their homes all around the world. They would go into their closets and send us stuff on Dropbox. We would listen, react, and have Zoom calls. Then we did one very significant music session, basically via Zoom, also at the height of Covid. We were never able to all be in one room.

Archival material was a huge part of this series. How do you identify and go through it?

Our process of working with archival material is the same for every film. We divide ourselves as producers and researchers: One team deals with still photography, another with moving images, another with newspaper coverage, and yet another with music and voice recordings. Then all of us work with our editors in the editing room to help put the series together.

Our partnership with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was a bit different from other partnerships because our film, in part, was inspired by their exhibition, and they have an extraordinary archive. They agreed to help us with their archives, research, and materials. We also worked with scholars who were integral to their exhibition, and they assisted in identifying witnesses and survivors and then helped us fact-check.



How is this film personal to you?

I'm a child (on my father's side) of Jewish refugees and spent a significant part of my young life around people who witnessed and survived, so the Holocaust was a very real experience for me. I'm the eldest child in my generation; I knew my grandparents and my great-grandparents very well. What was interesting is how remarkably little I actually knew about their experiences during the Holocaust. The first day we decided to make the film, I realized I didn't know the answers to so many questions. What did my relatives look like? How old were they when they died? Why did it take my family until 1949 to get here? Did America make it difficult? Did they decide to stay for other reasons? All these questions that the film addresses...

On the one hand, it's very personal. And on the other hand, it was the same journey of discovery as it was for me making *The Vietnam War* or *Hemingway* and our other films. I love that we have an inclusive and diverse group of people making films about every subject. Some of us might have a deeper personal connection to the subject or might be sitting next to somebody who doesn't, and we're discovering things together.



You began making this film in an America that looked different from the one we're currently living in. What was this experience like?

We started to make the film in 2015. The 2016 election hadn't happened. Charlottesville hadn't happened. The shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and at the supermarket in Buffalo hadn't happened. January 6th hadn't happened. Ukraine hadn't happened.

Daniel Mendelsohn says in the film, "The fragility of civilized behavior is the one thing you really learn." And, you know, Ken [Burns] said the other day, if you wanted to go to the most open and cosmopolitan city in Europe in 1929, 1930, you would have gone to Berlin. But four years later, Hitler was in power.

We're witnessing the fragility of democratic civilization all over the world, not just here. And why is that? I don't have an answer for it, but the echoes, relevance, and the stakes are different from when we started.

What is your hope for people coming out of this viewing experience?

I hope they learn something and have conversations about their role in a democratic society and their responsibilities to fellow human beings. To be kind to your neighbor, to think about what you would do and what you should do when things get hard and complicated. How can we work together?



A camera drone flies over the Treblinka memorial in Poland, 2020.



ABOUT THE DIRECTORS



Ken Burns has been making documentary films for over 40 years. Since the Academy Award-nominated *Brooklyn Bridge* in 1981, Burns has gone on to direct and produce some of the most acclaimed historical documentaries ever made, including *The Civil War*, *Baseball*, *Jazz*, *The War*, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*, *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*, *Jackie Robinson*, *The Vietnam War*, and *Country Music*.

Future film projects include *The American Buffalo*, *Leonardo da Vinci*, *The American Revolution*, *Emancipation to Exodus*, and *LBJ & the Great Society*, among others.

Burns' films have been honored with dozens of major awards, including 16 Emmy Awards, two Grammy Awards, and two Oscar nominations; and in September of 2008, at the News & Documentary Emmy Awards, Burns was honored by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences with a Lifetime Achievement Award.



Lynn Novick, co-director and producer of *The U.S. and the Holocaust*, has been making landmark documentary films about American life and culture for more than 30 years. She has created nearly 100 hours of acclaimed programming for PBS in collaboration with Ken Burns, including *Ernest Hemingway*, *The Vietnam War*, *Baseball*, *Jazz*, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, *The War*, and *Prohibition*—these landmark series have garnered 19 Emmy nominations. One of the most respected documentary filmmakers and storytellers in America, Novick herself has received Emmy, Peabody, and Alfred I. duPont Columbia Awards.

College Behind Bars, Novick's debut as solo director, premiered at the New York Film Festival and aired on PBS in 2019. Novick's next project as solo director and writer is a multipart PBS series on the history of crime and punishment in America, slated for release in 2026.



Sarah Botstein has for more than two decades produced some of the most popular and acclaimed documentaries on PBS. *The U.S. and the Holocaust* is Botstein's directorial debut. Her work with directors Ken Burns and Lynn Novick includes *Hemingway*, *College Behind Bars*, *The Vietnam War*, *Prohibition*, *The War*, and *Jazz*.

She is currently producing *The American Revolution* and *LBJ & the Great Society*. In addition to the television broadcasts, Botstein works on digital and education initiatives in collaboration with PBS Learning Media and WETA-TV.



THE U.S. AND THE HOLOCAUST IS A PRODUCTION OF **FLORENTINE FILMS** AND **WETA WASHINGTON, DC.**

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