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ANALYSIS

What Americans thought of Jewish refugees on the eve of World War II

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WASHINGTON — A poll published in Fortune magazine in July 1938 showed fewer than 5 percent of Americans believed the United States should raise its immigration quotas or encourage political refugees fleeing the fascist states in Europe to voyage across the Atlantic. The vast majority of those refugees were Jewish. Two-thirds of the poll respondents agreed with the proposition that "we should try to keep them out," according to the poll, published on the Twitter account @HistOpinion.

To be sure, the United States was emerging from the Great Depression, hardly a climate in which ordinary folks welcome immigrants and economic competition. The events of Kristallnacht — a wave of anti-Jewish pogroms in areas controlled by the Nazis — had yet to take place. And the poll's use of the term "political refugees" could have conjured in the minds of the American public images of communists, anarchists and other perceived ideological threats.

But data also tweeted by @HistOpinion shows that two-thirds of Americans polled in January 1939 — well after the events of Kristallnacht — said they would not take in 10,000 German-Jewish refugee children.

Most Western countries regarded the plight of Jewish refugees with skepticism or unveiled bigotry (and sympathy only followed wider knowledge of the monstrous slaughters of the Holocaust), as WorldViews wrote earlier this year:

"No matter the alarming rhetoric of [Adolf] Hitler's fascist state — and the growing acts of violence against Jews and others — popular sentiment in Western Europe and the United States was largely indifferent to the plight of German Jews.

"Of all the groups in the 20th century,' write the authors of the 1999 book 'Refugees in the Age of Genocide,' 'refugees from Nazism are now widely and popularly perceived as "genuine," but at the time German, Austrian and Czechoslovakian Jews were treated with ambivalence and outright hostility as well as sympathy.' "



A newspaper clip from the San Francisco News-Call Bulletin dated October 1, 1940, shows a group of German-Jewish and Czechoslovakian refugees on their arrival in San Francisco, Calif.
RAY CHAVEZ, OAKLAND TRIBUNE/MCT

It's worth remembering this mood when thinking about the current moment, in which the United States is once more in the throes of a debate over letting in refugees. Ever since Friday's terror attacks in Paris, the Republicans, led by their presidential candidates, have sounded the alarm over the threat of jihadist infiltration from Syria — even though it now appears every single one of the identified assailants was a European national.

They have signaled their intent to stop Syrian refugee arrivals, or at least accept only non-Muslim Syrians.

Republican presidential candidate Chris Christie of New Jersey was one of the many governors who on Monday said they would oppose settling Syrian refugees in their states; Christie insisted that he would not even permit "3-year-old orphans" entry.

Today's 3-year-old Syrian orphan, it seems, is 1939's German-Jewish child.

Of course, there are huge historical and contextual differences between then and now. But as Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank notes, it's hard to ignore the echoes of the past when faced with the "xenophobic bidding war" of the present:

"This growing cry to turn away people fleeing for their lives brings to mind the SS St. Louis, the ship of Jewish refugees turned away from Florida in 1939," writes Milbank. "It's perhaps the ugliest moment in a primary fight that has been sullied by bigotry from the start. It's no exaggeration to call this un-American."



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