

## Jews in America from the Mid-Twentieth Century through Today

In the years before World War II, antisemitism flourished in America. The anti-Jewish attitudes that had grown in the early twentieth century were magnified by the Great Depression as many Americans sought someone to blame for their misfortunes. In a Gallup Poll from 1938, 50% of Americans said that they had a "low-opinion" of Jews.

At the same time, anti-Jewish policies and anti-Jewish violence increased in Nazi Germany. Many German Jews sought to flee to America as discrimination and persecution increased. However, due to the National Origins Act of 1924, only a small percentage was allowed entry into the U.S. This restriction matched popular American sentiment. A 1938 Gallup Poll was conducted two weeks after Kristallnacht, when German and Austrian Jews were attacked and their businesses and synagogues were destroyed. Only 21.2% of Americans thought the government should allow more Jews to immigrate. These attitudes persisted as the situation of European Jews deteriorated. Since virtually every other country also refused to accept Jewish immigrants, most of these individuals were murdered in Nazi death camps during the Holocaust. Some Jewish individuals, including Albert Einstein, one of the most famous physicists in history, were able to immigrate. But most were trapped under Nazi control.

After entering the war, the U.S. government's position was that the best way to help the Jews in Europe was to win the war quickly. However, by 1944, with millions of Jews already dead, the administration felt it could no longer ignore the systematic murder of the Jewish population. After reading a report detailing U.S. failures to obstruct Hitler's destruction of Europe's Jewish population, President Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board. It saved approximately 200,000 Jews and was an important development in the idea that it is important to protect civilians in other countries.

Jewish experiences also influenced American immigration and asylum policies. Before World War II began, Jews under Nazi rule tried to flee to other countries, including the U.S., but were turned away. Most were later murdered in the Holocaust. In 1951, the U.S. and other members of the United Nations agreed not to return refugees against their will to any territory where they fear persecution. Today, America and other Western nations are safe havens for thousands fleeing persecution.

Lessons from the Holocaust also shaped medical and legal precepts. In response to inhuman Nazi experiments, new research guidelines requiring experimenters to receive the consent of human subjects were created. The trial of Nazi officials after the war established the principle that individuals could be held responsible for their role in crimes whether or not their government ordered them to commit the crimes and whether or not they were actually present when the crime was committed.

World War II and the Holocaust had a tremendous effect on America's Jews. One major effect was to greatly increase support for the creation of Israel. Zionism, the belief that the Jewish people have the right to create a country in their ancient homeland, had not previously been very influential among Jewish Americans. Attitudes changed after learning of the Holocaust in which six million Jews were brutally murdered and hundreds of thousands were left as survivors in horrible displaced persons camps with nowhere to go. Both of these facts fueled support for Zionism. First, immigration to Israel was seen as a solution to the question of where the survivors could live. Second, it was clear that a Jewish homeland could have prevented the

Holocaust and could prevent similar future atrocities. Other countries did little to save Jews, but a Jewish state could have offered them refuge. These realizations also led many to learn more about Zionism. For example, individuals might reflect on the fact that for millennia Jews had maintained a strong connection to the Land of Israel and the daily prayer service asked for Jewish exiles to be able to return.

World War II also impacted interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish Americans. Most Americans had never met a Jew before the war. During the war, more than 550,000 Jewish soldiers served. 26,000 of these Jewish soldiers received the Medal of Honor or the Purple Heart. In addition, sixty percent of all Jewish physicians under the age of 45 served in the armed forces during the war. Interacting with Jews in the military challenged antisemitic ideas.

Furthermore, when the horrors of the Holocaust became known, antisemitism became less socially acceptable. One indicator of this was the film, *Gentleman's Agreement*, which won three Oscars including Best Picture in 1947. The film was critical of antisemitism in American society. During the 1950s, barriers to Jewish participation in mainstream American life continued to shrink. Clubs and hotels began admitting Jews. University quotas limiting the number of Jewish students were removed. Businesses and banks became willing to hire Jewish individuals.

America's acceptance of Jews both enabled and was reinforced by Jewish entertainers. Unlike earlier Jewish entertainers who tried to hide their Jewish identity, Jewish actors and comedians in the 1950s were identifiably Jewish. This shows an increased confidence among Jews regarding their acceptance in America. These Jewish individuals further eroded antisemitism through their popularity and by exposing millions of Americans to Jewish culture. Words such as "klutz" and "oy" entered the American vocabulary as Jewish culture became more mainstream. Likewise, foods such as the bagel and kosher dill pickle entered American cuisine.

At the same time, elements of American Jewish culture began to disappear as Jews became more assimilated. Throughout Jewish American history, many Jews felt that sounding or looking different from their non-Jewish neighbors was an obstacle towards acceptance and success. The Eastern European Jews who immigrated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries urged their children to become "as American" as possible. Unfortunately, this often resulted in the loss of cultural elements that set Jews apart such as the use of the Yiddish language. The disappearance of Yiddish theater and literature was accelerated by the growth of the suburbs, since this destroyed the Jewish neighborhoods upon which these institutions depended.

A less direct effect of the Holocaust on American Jews was to spur great levels of participation in the Civil Rights Movement. The memory of their own community's recent experience with vicious hatred, combined with Jewish ethical teachings, inspired many Jews to fight for the equality of all Americans regardless of race. Approximately half of the civil rights attorneys in the South during the 1960s and half of the white Freedom Riders who fought segregation were Jewish. Almost two-thirds of the white people who went to Mississippi in 1964 to challenge Jim Crow Laws during Freedom Summer were Jewish, including Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, two of the three activists in the campaign who were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.

Jews were also very involved in the struggle for women's rights. Many feminist leaders, as well as many of the rank-and-file, are Jewish. Betty Friedan is widely considered the most influential American feminist after World War II. Her 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, attacked the notion that women could find fulfillment only through childbearing and homemaking. Gloria Steinem, cofounder of the national Women's Political Caucus and founder of *Ms. Magazine*, is

also Jewish. So was Bella Abzug, a leading Feminist who was elected to Congress after stating "This woman's place is in the House — the House of Representatives."

Feminism also affected Jews in other ways. Most notably, it had a profound effect on the Jewish religion. Judaism had long taught that men and women had equal worth but different responsibilities. As a result of American feminism, gender roles in religious worship were challenged. In 1972, Sally Priesand became the first woman rabbi, a leader of a Jewish congregation. Many communities have added traditions affirming the equality and experiences of women in Judaism. Even within many traditionally observant Jewish communities, religious women focus on increased inclusion within the framework of traditional modes of worship.

Another mass movement within the American Jewish community during this time was advocacy on behalf of the more than four million Soviet Jews. Jews in the former Soviet Union were prohibited from practicing their religion freely and often faced harsh discrimination, but few were given permission to leave the country. American Jews traveled to the Soviet Union to secretly offer support. They also strove to raise attention to the issue and to urge the U.S. government to help. In 1987, a quarter-million people marched in Washington to urge action. Ultimately, this grass roots movement succeeded and most Jews from the former Soviet Union now live in Israel, Western Europe, or the United States.

Jewish Americans are an incredibly diverse group. They hold the same wide range of political beliefs and occupations as other Americans. Some have families who have lived in America for centuries; others have immigrated recently. Some observe all of the millennia-old traditional Jewish practices; some feel that individual choice in how to express one's religion is the best way for them to connect to their Jewish religious heritage; and some are not religiously observant. Along with this diversity, American Jews have a strong sense of community and Jewish communal organizations thrive. These organizations include religious, social, educational, cultural, and philanthropic institutions. Some cater to the Jewish community; others are devoted to providing services to the larger community.

Today, Jews are integrated into mainstream American culture and society more than ever before. Unlike times past when opportunities were limited or when Jews changed their names to be more accepted by mainstream society, Jewish heritage is not typically seen as an obstacle to success. Jewish American experiences show that the struggle for greater equality and acceptance is part of American history and that this struggle can succeed.