

# When Do We Get Involved? U.S. Responses to Global Refugee Crises

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- In what ways has the United States responded to refugees' requests for assistance in the past?
- What is current U.S. policy toward refugees, or those seeking asylum?
- Do nations, including the United States, have a moral obligation to help people from other nations suffering persecution?

## Overview

After developing a preliminary position on whether the U.S. has a moral obligation to aid persecuted people around the world, students will view eye witness testimonies related to U.S. policies and actions toward persecuted Jews during World War II. Students will analyze portions of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human rights as a response to global inaction during the Holocaust. In the second portion of the lesson, students will view eye witness clips to learn about U.S. policies and actions toward victims of global persecution since World War II, and then analyze the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to determine ways in which U.S. policies on aid to refugees have or have not changed. Finally, students will write letters to members of Congress responding to U.S. policies towards refugees.

## Target Audience

High School U.S. or World History

## Activity Duration

Two 45–60 minutes class periods

## Enduring Understandings

- Throughout modern history, persecution against different social groups has forced people to flee their homelands to safety.
- The United Nations supports the protection of certain basic human rights. Member nations from around the world have pledged to uphold these rights.
- Nations' actual responses to refugee crises have varied over time and circumstances.

### KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Describe United States policies and actions toward global victims of persecution during and since World War II
- Identify current U.S. policies toward today's refugee crises
- Develop a well-supported argument for or against current U.S. policies, using evidence gleaned from eye witness testimonies

### Background Information/Links

The decision to risk personal security to intervene on behalf of another human being is always a complicated one. Whether it is standing up for a friend against a bully, marching for LGBTQ+ rights, or peacefully defying segregation laws, a person who decides to confront injustice recognizes that they may face negative consequences but act anyway. In times of genocide, when intervention often carries with it the risk of severe punishment or execution, these decisions to help are especially fraught. In all genocides—from the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust to the Rwandan and Syrian Genocides—there were a few courageous individuals who risked everything to help victims of persecution, guided by their desire to correct injustice. Their actions took many forms, from working through official channels to take victims to safety to secretly hiding victims or anonymously providing a scrap of food.

For additional information:

- BBC: “Ethics: A General Introduction,”  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/intro\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/intro_1.shtml)
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: “Genocide Timeline”  
<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007095>
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: “Oskar Schindler”  
<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005787>
- Armenian National Institute: “The Armenian Genocide: Context and Legacy”  
[http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Education.56/current\\_category.117/resourceguide\\_detail.html#full\\_text](http://www.armenian-genocide.org/Education.56/current_category.117/resourceguide_detail.html#full_text)
- History.com: “Rwandan Genocide”  
<https://www.history.com/topics/rwandan-genocide>

### MATERIALS

- Computer with Internet connection and a projector
- If available, devices with internet access, one per student or student pair
- Handout, The Search for Safety: Refugees Seek Assistance, one copy per student
- Ideally, the teacher will have placed the clips in a location accessible to students prior to the lesson.

## Background Information/Links

The United States and the rest of the international community have responded in various ways to humanitarian crises throughout its history. Perhaps most notorious is the world's failure to act to end the persecution of Jews in Europe prior to and during World War II. Although the world was well aware of Nazi Germany's victimization of the Jewish population in the mid- and late-1930s, nations refused to relax their immigration policies to welcome refugees and declined to apply any pressure on Germany to cease its discriminatory policies. At the Evian Conference in 1938, only one country—the Dominican Republic—agreed to accept Jewish refugees from Germany. As World War II continued, Great Britain and the United States received intelligence reports about Nazi Germany's concentration camps and genocidal crimes but insisted that the best way to help the victims would be to win the war rather than directly target the camps.

Following World War II, as the international community woke to the full horror of the Holocaust, it resolved to always take action in defense of human rights anywhere. In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, obligating—but in a non-binding way—its member states to participate in the defense of victims of human rights abuses. Since then, the U.N. has involved itself in some humanitarian crises, primarily by issuing resolutions condemning human rights abuses, trying to negotiate peace, and sending in “peacekeeping” forces. One such crisis was the 1993–1995 Bosnian War, in which the United Nations became involved militarily. In other instances, such as the Rwandan Genocide, the U.N. sought to avoid involvement almost entirely. The United Nations and the United States have been similarly reluctant to intervene directly in current refugee crises, such as those in Syria and Central America.

For more information:

- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: “1933: How Did Americans React?” [https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/museum-publications/memory-and-action/1933-how-did-americans-react; “The United States and the Holocaust”](https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/museum-publications/memory-and-action/1933-how-did-americans-react;The%20United%20States%20and%20the%20Holocaust) <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005182>
- United Nations Refugee Agency <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/>

- Council on Foreign Relations  
“The Dilemma of Humanitarian Intervention”  
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/dilemma-humanitarian-intervention>



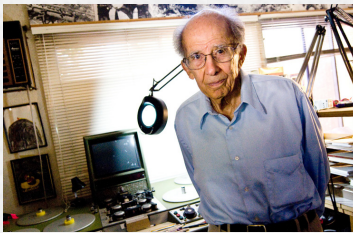
## Procedure

### Consider

- 1 The teacher will ask students if they know what refugee means. If necessary, explain that refugees are people who have had to leave their countries due to violence, natural disaster, oppression, or persecution.
- 2 The teacher will present information (video clips, if possible) about current refugee crises, including the Syrian refugee crisis and the flight of people from drug cartel violence in Central America.
  - Good sources of information for Syria include the U.N. Refugee Agency website (<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>) and CNN (<https://www.cnn.com/specials/middleeast/syria>).
  - Good sources of information for Central America include the U.N. Refugee Agency website (<https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/central-america/>), CNN (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/06/us/mexico-caravan-migrants-stories/index.html>), and the Brookings Institution (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2018/06/26/violence-drives-immigration-from-central-america/>).
- 3 The teacher will ask students to discuss what U.S. policy should be regarding these refugees. The teacher should briefly record the class' thoughts in a place that will be visible throughout the lesson.
  - Does the U.S. have a moral obligation to help refugees?
  - What are the benefits of accepting refugees into the U.S. and/or providing them with aid?
  - What are the potential financial, social, and cultural challenges?
  - Which interest should be most important in determining the U.S.'s policy towards refugees: human rights, financial costs, social impacts, or something else?

### Collect/Identify

- 4 The teacher will explain that the United States has taken varying positions on helping victims of persecution from other nations throughout history.
- 5 Individually, in pairs, or as a class, students will view a number of eye witness clips regarding the role of the U.S. in aiding victims of the Holocaust, touching on failed attempts by Jews to get visas to the U.S., the Evian Conference, etc. Individually, students will record information about each clip using the graphic organizer, “The Search for Safety: Refugees Seek Assistance.”
- 6 The teacher will facilitate a discussion in which students describe and evaluate the U.S. response to the persecution of Jews in Europe.
  - ❑ What were official U.S. policies toward persecuted Jews?
  - ❑ What actions (official and unofficial) did the U.S. take with regard to persecuted Jews?
  - ❑ What were U.S. justifications for these policies and actions?
  - ❑ Was the U.S. response to persecuted Jews morally “correct”? (Refer back to the moral positions developed at the beginning of the lesson.)
- 7 The teacher will present the first, second, fifth, sixth, and eighth paragraphs of the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for students to analyze as a class. (If desired, you may show students the entire document: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>)
  - ❑ What does this document mean?
  - ❑ How is it a response to the Holocaust?
  - ❑ What does it encourage U.N. member nations to do?
  - ❑ Is this agreement binding in any way?



### Construct/Learn

Students will view a number of eye witness clips regarding the role of the U.S. in aiding victims of persecution since WWII, such as the Rwandan and Cambodian genocides.



- 8 Students will record information about each clip on the same graphic organizer used earlier, “The Search for Safety: Refugees Seek Assistance.”
- 9 The teacher will lead a brief discussion of students’ findings, asking whether the U.S. positions regarding aid to victims of persecution have changed.
  - ❑ Did the United States intervene directly in the other nation’s affairs to stop of persecution?
  - ❑ Did the United States make more efforts to assist victims than it had during the Holocaust?
  - ❑ Was it significantly easier for victims to emigrate to the U.S. than it had been immediately before and during World War II?

### Communicate/Act

- 10 Students will visit the web page of their Congressional representative or U.S. Senator to determine their position on assistance to refugees from Syria and/or Central America. To find their Representative students can visit <https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>. To find their U.S. Senator, students can visit <https://www.senate.gov/senators/> (ALTERNATIVELY, if this information cannot be found, the teacher can present brief news clips or articles that outline current federal attitudes toward refugees. Official statements of U.S. policy can be found on the State Department website, <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/>).
- 11 Students will draft emails to their Congressional representatives supporting or opposing the representative’s position on refugees, using evidence from this lesson to support their argument. Students’ emails should include:
  - 12 A summary of the U.S.’ or Congress person’s position on international refugees.
  - 13 The student’s opinion about this position.
  - 14 At least three details from past refugee crises that support the student’s opinion.

## Connections

Connect to Student Lives	Connect to Contemporary Events	Connect to the Future
Students will think about their own moral positions regarding helping victims of persecution.	Students will relate U.S. actions and policies regarding past refugee crises to those regarding current crises in Syria and Central America.	Students will make recommendations for future U.S. policies regarding aid to victims of persecution.



## Clips of Testimony

### Part One: Collect

#### ■ Eva Brewster

She details her attempt with her mother to find refuge in Texas with her mother's sister only to be denied because the U.S. government said that a sibling relationship didn't qualify them.

#### ■ Peter Braunfeld

He explains the complicated American quota system based on country of birth rather than citizenship and the lengthy waits to be allowed to immigrate to the United States.

#### ■ Herbert Achtentuch

He blames the world for the Holocaust because only one country, the Dominican Republic, agreed to accept Jewish refugees from Germany at the Evian Conference in 1938.

#### ■ Gisela Feldman

She describes the unsuccessful attempt by refugees to reach Cuba and the United States by a ship, the St. Louis. Despite having visas, the ship's passengers were forbidden to land in Cuba and, when they tried to seek safety along the Florida coast, were confronted by U.S. military vessels.

## Clips of Testimony

### Part Two: Construct



#### ■ Diane Uwera

She explains the loss of her parents during the Rwandan Genocide and why it took ten years to get permission for her aunt in the United States to adopt her and bring her to Texas.

#### ■ Sara Pol-Lim

She explains how, after spending years in refugee camps in Asia, her family was allowed to immigrate to the United States because her brother was already here. She also describes the large amount of paperwork that was required.

#### ■ Romeo Dallaire

He describes his unsuccessful use of the media to sway public opinion and the refusal of the international community—including the U.S.—to intervene to stop the killing of Tutsis.





## Universal Declaration of Human Rights

### Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people. . .

. . . Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms . . .

. . . Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Source: United Nations. (10 December 1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

# The Search for Safety: Refugees Seek Assistance



Individual	What kind of help did they want and from whom?	What processes or procedures did they follow?	What was the result of their efforts? Did they get help?
Eva Brewster			
Peter Braunfeld			
Herbert Achtentuch			
Gisela Feldman			
Diane Uwera			
Sara Pol-Lim			
Romeo Dallaire			

# Survivor and Witness Biographies



STUDENT HANDOUT

**Eva Brewster** was born on December 28, 1922 in Berlin, Germany to an affluent, secular Jewish family. She was the middle child of five siblings. While in high school, Eva's French teacher performed the Nazi salute daily and encouraged the students to sign up for the Hitler Youth. This teacher demanded that the headmistress expel all Jewish students, but instead the headmistress taught the Jewish students separately. Due to anti-Jewish laws, Eva was expelled from school in 1938. Fearing for their lives, her family applied unsuccessfully to many countries for a visa. In 1939, due to anti-Jewish laws, her father's business was taken away, her family's accounts blocked, and their house requisitioned. By this time, she was married, so she moved in with her husband's parents. On July 11, 1940, Eva gave birth to a girl, Reha, a name she chose from the list of names that Jews were allowed to give their children. Beginning in 1941, she performed forced labor in a factory that manufactured army materials. While working at the factory, Eva joined the resistance, and in the winter of 1941, Eva divorced her husband and sent her child to East Prussia so that she could be trained and work as a resistance agent. In 1943, on her way to an assignment, she was arrested and sentenced to death by firing squad, but was freed by a resistance agent embedded within the Gestapo. In 1943, she was sent to Auschwitz, where she was reunited with her ex-husband and daughter until their deaths at the camp. Eva was liberated on May 5, 1945 by the Allied armed forces. She married Ross Brewster, a British officer, in 1947. The Brewsters lived in Scotland, England, and Nigeria before immigrating to Canada in 1969. Eva worked as a journalism instructor and wrote *Vanished in Darkness: an Auschwitz Memoir*, published in 1984. She was interviewed on July 15, 1999 in Coutts, Alberta, Canada.

**Peter Braunfeld** was born on December 12, 1930, in Vienna, Austria to Fritz, a lawyer and law professor, and Johanna, a French and German teacher. On

March 13, 1938, the day of the Anschluss, Peter was witnessed a pro-Hitler demonstration. The family was able to escape legally and with many of their possessions to Brno, Czechoslovakia in July 1938. Shortly after their arrival, Brno was ceded to the Germans. In September 1938, they took a train from Brno to Prague, Czechoslovakia. The family left Prague in July 1939, right before the war broke out September that year. His father's aunt Hedy Münster sponsored them to immigrate to the United Kingdom. The journey took them from Prague to Dresden to Leipzig and then to the Dutch border. They arrived in London and Peter continued school. War broke out shortly thereafter, Peter's school was evacuated they were sent to a small English village near the Scottish border. In 1940, Peter and his family emigrated from Glasgow, Scotland to the U.S. by boat and eventually moved to Chicago. Peter was interviewed on June 23, 1997 in Urbana, Illinois, USA.

**Herbert Achtentuch** was born in Vienna, Austria on September 22, 1922. His family lived in the same building where his father worked as a doctor. Herbert was an only child. Growing up, Herbert attended public school and then opted to continue on to an alternate secondary school. There, he began a specialized form of training that prepared students for university. However, at the age of 15, Herbert was expelled from school under Hitler's new anti-Jewish policies. These measures not only impacted the Jewish students, but also the non-Jewish students who were displaced from their schools as a result of mass transfers of students. This disruption fueled even more anti-Semitic attitudes in Vienna and sparked violence among youth there. Shortly after Nazi forces invaded Vienna, conditions worsened. Nazi symbols became more prominent throughout Herbert's community—sympathizers began displaying signs in their yards, storefronts, and other visible spaces. This public support was then reinforced with a series of laws that targeted Jewish businesses. Herbert's own



father was impacted by these policies as under these stipulations, it was legal for a non-Jewish doctor to take control of Herbert's father's medical practice. The man who took over his father's practice did so without offering any sort of financial compensation—rather, he demanded the family turn over both the apartment and business. Lacking both a home and a source of income, Herbert's father made efforts to relocate his family to the United States. During this time, the immigration process was lengthy and complicated by the volume of people seeking to leave Nazi-occupied Austria. Fortunately for Herbert, however, his father's status as a Russian-born immigrant helped accelerate the process. Both he and his family acquired the necessary documentation and then resumed their immigration efforts. After a series of delays, Herbert and his family were finally able to immigrate to the United States. Unfortunately, this trip would prove daunting. Their travels were fraught with adversities—while Herbert's family was in transit, their ship was intercepted by a powerful hurricane that endangered the ship and passengers. Eventually, they arrived in the United States via Hoboken, New Jersey. There, Herbert and his parents connected with a relative who lived in the Bronx in New York. They would live with this relative while Herbert attended community college and his father attempted to renew his medical license. After a while, both Herbert and his father succeeded in their efforts and Herbert's entire immediate family relocated to Passaic, New Jersey. Herbert would ultimately meet his wife Marion while living in America. They have children and grandchildren of their own. This interview was conducted in Forest Hills, New York on June 8, 1998.

**Gisela Feldman** was born on September 18, 1923, in Berlin, Germany. Her parents were originally from Poland. As a result, Gisela's father was deported back to Poland in October 1938 after the Nazi-led government expelled Jews of Polish origin from Germany. On November 9, the night of Kristallnacht,

Gisela and her mother and sister were evicted from their apartment. They moved in with an aunt, and her mother began trying to get them out of the country. She discovered that the Cuban embassy was selling visas and was able to secure four visas. Gisela, her mother, and sister boarded the luxury ship, St. Louis, bound for Cuba. Gisela remembers being her relief when boarding and the weeks spent swimming, watching movies, and walking on the decks. However, when the ship arrived in Cuba, the refugees were not allowed to disembark. After a week, the ship left for Florida where they were also denied entry. The captain had to turn the ship around. The ship did not return to Germany. Instead, it docked in Antwerp, Belgium, and the family transferred to a cargo ship taking them to London, England. Unable to join them, Gisela's father died in a concentration camp in Poland. Gisela later married Oscar Feldman and had three children. Gisela Feldman was interviewed on May 18, 1998, in Manchester, England.

**Diane Uwera** was born on December 7, 1988, in Butare, Rwanda, to a Tutsi family. At age 5, when the Genocide Against the Tutsi began in Rwanda and Tutsis were targeted for mass murder, she and her family were forced to hide in a nearby school. On the third night at the school, she was separated from her family and later discovered that many of the people who were also taking refuge in the school had been murdered, including her sister. A lady who lived nearby and knew her family rescued and hid her. When the conflict ended, the same woman took her to an orphanage. Over the next two months, she lived in two different orphanages before being relocated to a third orphanage in Burundi; there, she was found by her cousin. Diane returned to Rwanda and went to live with her aunt in Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda. She lived with her aunt until she was 17 and then she relocated to the United States to live with another aunt. The interview with Diane took place on December 6, 2010, in Houston, Texas.

# Survivor and Witness Biographies



STUDENT HANDOUT

**Sara Pol-Lim** was born on Aug 21, 1968, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. She was the oldest of four children. When the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975, she and her family were forced from their home and deported to a camp deep in the Cambodian jungle. Because Sara had grown up in the city, the Khmer regime targeted her for being “corrupted” by outside, foreign influences. Sara was forced to attend “reeducation” classes that promoted Khmer ideological propaganda and gather supplies for the camp. She was separated from her father, who was sent to a male work camp and never heard from again. Food became scarce and two of her younger brothers died of malnutrition. Sara survived thanks to the aid of her remaining brother, who scavenged for insects and plants for her to eat, but he eventually died of malnutrition as well. Two years after the Khmer Rouge takeover, she was separated from her remaining family and brought to a children’s camp. There, she befriended an older girl who helped her to escape through the jungle and reunite with her mother. Her journey did not end there, however, as the Khmer Rouge government began to crumble by the end of 1978 and she and her mother fled to a refugee camp in Thailand. There, Sara resumed her education. In 1981, she and her mother immigrated to the United States, and settled in Long Beach, California, where they reunited with family members. She earned a master’s degree from Chapman University and went on to be elected Executive Director of a Cambodian community nonprofit that aids refugees. She was interviewed on May 26, 2015, in Long Beach, California.

Lieutenant-General (ret) Honorable **Roméo A. Dallaire** was born on June 25, 1946 in Denekamp, Netherlands. In late 1993, Dallaire was appointed Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). Before the Genocide Against the Tutsi began in April 1994, General Dallaire voiced concerns and provided intel to the United Nations regarding a planned massacre organized by extremists in Rwanda’s government but his warnings went unacknowledged. Soon after the genocide began, UN officials denied General Dallaire’s request for additional troops, reduced his contingent to several hundred, and eventually ordered him to withdraw with his forces. General Dallaire refused to leave and with a small force of Ghanaian and Tunisian forces, remained in Rwanda and saved thousands of lives as a result. General Dallaire published a book about his experience in Rwanda, titled *Shake Hands with the Devil: the Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*, and his efforts to save lives during the genocide earned him the Meritorious Service Cross, the United States Legion of Merit, and the Aegis Award on Genocide Prevention. After the genocide, General Dallaire revealed that he suffered from post-traumatic stress (PTS) as a result of his experiences in Rwanda and has become a vocal supporter for military veterans with PTS as a result. He went on to serve in the Canadian Senate, is an advocate for ending the use of child soldiers in conflicts around the globe, and continues to promote effective mass-atrocity prevention. His interview was recorded on November 6, 2011, in Los Angeles, California.

## National Standards

### College, Career & Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards

D2.Civ.7.9-12 Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.

D2.Civ.12.9-12 Analyze how people use and challenge local, state, national, and international laws to address a variety of public issues.

D2.Civ.14.9-12 Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

D3.1.9-12. Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.

D4.6.9-12. Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems; instances of such problems in multiple contexts; and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address these problems over time and place.

D4.7.9-12. Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.

### Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.