What Could They Know?

Weighing news and uncertainty during the Holocaust

SS24.HOS.9b "Evaluate the extent to which Americans were aware of Nazi antisemitic and racial policies and the Holocaust through the information and news available to them during the 1930s and 1940s."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline reports that gave Americans information about Nazi persecution or mass murder, and circle reasons their understanding could remain limited. Use your marks to judge what Americans could have known.

News from Nazi Germany

1. In 1935, American newspapers reported that Germany's Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of citizenship and banned marriages between Jews and people classified as having "German blood." In November 1938, papers described smashed Jewish shops and burning synagogues during the Nazi attacks known as Kristallnacht. Radio reports also reached listeners. These reports made Nazi persecution visible well before World War II. Yet reading a headline was not the same as understanding what the Nazi government might do next.

2. During the war, information about mass murder reached the United States in stages. In 1942, American newspapers printed reports that Nazis were killing large numbers of Jews in occupied Europe. On December 17, the United States and other Allied governments publicly condemned Germany's plan to exterminate Europe's Jews. These were warnings about systematic killing, not merely discriminatory laws. Still, Nazi secrecy, wartime barriers to reporting, and the difficulty of verifying accounts from occupied territory left many Americans unsure about the scale and methods of the killings.

3. In 1944, the U.S. War Refugee Board published detailed accounts of killing at Auschwitz, including the use of gas chambers. By then, newspapers and radio had offered Americans chances to learn about both earlier persecution and mass murder. But people followed different news sources, and some reports received less attention than others. Antisemitism and disbelief also led some readers to dismiss evidence. It is too simple to claim that all Americans knew nothing, or that all understood the Holocaust's full scope.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. What could Americans learn about Nazi policies from reports in 1935 and 1938?

2. How did the information available in 1942 change what Americans could know?

3. What did the War Refugee Board's 1944 accounts add to the information available?

4. Why would available news not have given every American the same understanding of the Holocaust?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-sentence museum label assessing what an American following the news from 1935 to 1944 could have known. Include two dated news developments, one limit on understanding, and a qualified judgment about Americans' awareness.

ANSWER KEY

What Could They Know?

HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.HOS.9b

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline reports that gave Americans information about Nazi persecution or mass murder, and circle reasons their understanding could remain limited. Use your marks to judge what Americans could have known. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	What could Americans learn about Nazi policies from reports in 1935 and 1938?	**They could learn that Nazi laws took away Jews' citizenship and restricted marriage, and that Nazi attacks destroyed Jewish shops and synagogues.**
2	How did the information available in 1942 change what Americans could know?	**Reports and an Allied announcement warned that Nazis were systematically killing Jews, going beyond the earlier news of discrimination and attacks.**
3	What did the War Refugee Board's 1944 accounts add to the information available?	**They gave detailed accounts of killing at Auschwitz, including the use of gas chambers.**
4	Why would available news not have given every American the same understanding of the Holocaust?	**People followed different news sources, while secrecy and reporting barriers made details hard to verify. Some also dismissed reports because of antisemitism or disbelief.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

By 1935, newspaper readers could learn that Nazi laws stripped German Jews of citizenship. In 1942, reports of mass killing and an Allied announcement warned that persecution had become an extermination campaign. Yet secrecy and the difficulty of checking news from occupied Europe made the scale and methods harder to grasp. Americans had access to serious warnings, but their knowledge varied with the news they encountered and whether they believed it.

Accept judgments that distinguish access to information from universal awareness. Responses should use dated evidence from the passage and avoid claiming that all Americans knew either everything or nothing.