How the NYT Missed the Story of the Holocaust While It Was Happening

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What did *The New York Times* report about the Holocaust and how did its coverage affect America's response to the Nazi genocide?

Throughout World War II, the American media published and broadcast timely, detailed, and accurate accounts of what was happening to the Jews in Europe. The *New York Times* alone printed nearly 1,200 articles about what we have now come to call the Holocaust, about one every other day.

The articles in the *Times* and elsewhere described the propagation of anti-Semitic laws in German allied countries; death from disease and starvation of hundreds of thousands in ghettos and labor camps; mass executions in Nazi-occupied Russia; and mass gassings in Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Maidanek. The articles also indicated that these were not isolated incidents, but part of a systematic campaign to kill all the Jews in Europe.

And yet, at the end of the war and for decades afterward, Americans claimed they did not know about the Holocaust as it was happening. How was it possible for so much information to be available in the mass media and yet simultaneously for the public to be ignorant?

The reason is that the American media in general and the *New York Times* in particular never treated the Holocaust as an important news story. From the start of the war in Europe to its end nearly six years later, the story of the Holocaust made the *Times* front page only 26 times out of 24,000 front-page stories, and most of those stories referred to the victims as "refugees" or "persecuted minorities." In only six of those stories were Jews identified on page one as the primary victims.

Nor did the story lead the paper, appearing in the right-hand column reserved for the day's most important news – not even when the concentration camps were liberated at the end of the war. In addition, the *Times* intermittently and timidly editorialized about the extermination of the Jews, and the paper rarely highlighted it in either the Week in Review or the magazine section.

What kept American journalists from recognizing the significance of the systematic murder of six million people? Worldwide carnage on an unprecedented scale helped obscure the Jews' plight. There was also skepticism bred by fake atrocity reports during the previous world war. The Roosevelt Administration's determination to downplay the news also contributed to the subdued coverage. But the media had enough credible information to treat the news of the extermination of the Jews as important. And the *New York Times* played a critical role in why it didn't.

For no American news organization was better positioned to highlight the Holocaust than the *Times*, and no American news organization so influenced public discourse by its failure to do so.

Because of its longtime commitment to international affairs, its willingness to sacrifice advertising rather than articles in the face of a newsprint crunch, and its substantial Jewish readership, the *Times* was able to obtain and publish more news about what was happening to the Jews than other mainstream newspapers. In addition, Jews of German descent owned the *Times* and thus knew the fate of family members, some of whom they sponsored to immigrate to the States, some of whom they didn't. The family's deep, if not always amicable involvement with the American Jewish community also led the *Times* to learn much about the Jews' situation.

So the *New York Times* was less likely than other news organizations to miss what was happening to the Jews. But it was also more likely to dismiss its significance. Fearful of accusations of special pleading or dual loyalties, the newspaper hesitated to highlight the news. In addition, the newspaper's Jewish publisher believed that Jews were neither a racial nor ethnic group, and therefore should not be identified as Jews for any other than religious reasons. He also believed that Americans would only want to help Jews if their cause was melded with that of other persecuted people. He therefore ensured that his paper universalized the Nazis' victims in editorials and on the front page.

The result: *The New York Times* was in touch with European Jews' suffering, which accounts for its 1,000-plus stories on the Final Solution's steady progress. Yet, it deliberately de-emphasized the Holocaust news, reporting it in isolated, inside stories. The few hundred words about the Nazi genocide the *Times* published every couple days were hard to find amidst a million other words in the newspaper. *Times* readers could legitimately have claimed not to have known, or at least not to have understood, what was happening to the Jews.

The *Times's* judgment that the murder of millions of Jews was a relatively unimportant story also reverberated among other journalists trying to assess the news, among Jewish groups trying to arouse public opinion, and among government leaders trying to decide on an American response. It partly explains the general apathy and inaction that greeted the news of the Holocaust.

We do not know how many Jews might have been saved had the *Times* acted differently. We do know, however, that the possibilities for rescue were never truly tested.

It is also clear that had the *Times* and other news organizations decided that the extermination of the Jews was important, the paper could have and should have highlighted it, regardless of whether it would have saved lives. The press alone could not have altered the currents of public discourse that swamped the news of the Jews' destruction, and certainly a single newspaper by itself could not have accomplished that. Still, the *Times* had a moral and professional obligation to do more than be swept along with the tide.