



*Why Teach About The  
Holocaust?*

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# Why Teach About The Holocaust

The objective of teaching any subject is to engage the intellectual curiosity of the students in order to inspire critical thought and personal growth. Therefore it is essential that educators consider questions of rationale whenever they approach a subject.

When educators take the time to consider the reasons for their lessons on the Holocaust, they will be more likely to select content that speaks to their student's interest and that provides them with a clearer understanding of a complex history.

The following considerations may encourage reflection on the reasons for teaching about the Holocaust:

- The Holocaust was a watershed event, not only for the twentieth century but in the entire history of humanity. It was an unprecedented attempt to murder a whole people and to extinguish its culture. The Holocaust should be studied because it fundamentally challenges the foundations of civilization.
- A thorough study of the Holocaust helps students think about the use and abuse of power and the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organizations and nations when confronted with human rights violations. It can heighten awareness of the genocidal potential in the contemporary world.
- Study of the Holocaust assists students in developing an understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, anti-semitism and stereotyping in any society. It helps students develop an awareness of the value of diversity in a pluralistic society and encourages sensitivity to the positions of minorities.
- The Holocaust demonstrates how a modern nation can utilize its technological expertise and bureaucratic infrastructure to implement destructive policies ranging from social engineering to genocide.
- The Holocaust provides a context for exploring the dangers of remaining silent and indifferent in the face of the oppression of others.
- As students gain insights into the many historical, social, religious, political and economic factors that cumulatively resulted in the Holocaust, they gain awareness of the complexity of the historical process and a perspective on how a convergence of factors can contribute to the disintegration of democratic values. Students come to understand that it is the responsibility of citizens in a democracy to learn to identify the danger signals and to know when and how to react.
- The Holocaust has become a central cultural theme. This is reflected in media representation and popular culture. Holocaust education can offer students accurate historical knowledge and critical thinking skills needed to understand and evaluate these manifestations.

Source: THC Education working group 2002

## Methodological Considerations

*As a memorial museum, USHMM recommends grounding the history through the use of a variety of artifacts which are the evidence of what took place during the Holocaust. This approach also aids in meeting state and national teaching standards, which frequently endorse the use of primary sources.*

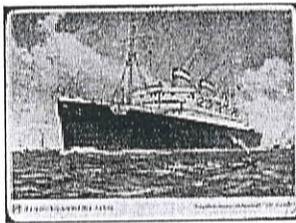
The teaching of Holocaust history demands of educators a high level of sensitivity and a keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter. The following recommendations, while reflecting approaches that would be appropriate for effective teaching in general, are particularly relevant to Holocaust education.

- *Define the term "Holocaust"*



- The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims—six million were murdered; Gypsies, the handicapped and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

- *Do not teach or imply that the Holocaust was inevitable*



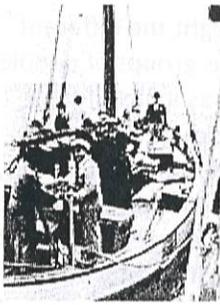
- Just because a historical event took place, and it is documented in textbooks and on film, does not mean that it had to happen. This seemingly obvious concept is often overlooked by students and teachers alike. The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups, and nations made decisions to act or not to act. Focusing on those decisions leads to insights into history and human nature and can better help your students to become critical thinkers.

- *Avoid simple answers to complex questions*



- The history of the Holocaust raises difficult questions about human behavior and the context within which individual decisions are made. Be wary of oversimplification. Seek instead to nuance the story. Allow students to think about the many factors and events that contributed to the Holocaust and often made decision-making difficult and uncertain.

- *Strive for Precision of Language*



- Any study of the Holocaust touches upon nuances of human behavior. Because of the complexity of the history, there is a temptation to generalize and, thus, to distort the facts (e.g., "all concentration camps were killing centers" or "all Germans were collaborators"). Rather, you must strive to help your students clarify the information presented and encourage them to distinguish, for example, the differences between prejudice and discrimination, collaborators and bystanders, armed and spiritual resistance, direct orders and assumed orders, concentration camps and killing centers, and guilt and responsibility.

Words that describe human behavior often have multiple meanings. Resistance, for example, usually refers to a physical act of armed revolt. During the Holocaust, it also encompassed partisan activity; the smuggling of messages, food, and weapons; sabotage; and actual military engagement. Resistance may also be thought of as willful disobedience such as continuing to practice religious and cultural traditions in defiance of the rules or creating fine art, music, and poetry inside ghettos and concentration camps. For many, simply maintaining the will to remain alive in the face of abject brutality was an act of spiritual resistance.

Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions. Though all Jews were targeted for destruction by the Nazis, the experiences of all Jews were not the same. Remind your students that, although members of a group may share common experiences and beliefs, generalizations about them, without benefit of modifying or qualifying terms (e.g., "sometimes," "usually," "in many cases but not all") tend to stereotype group behavior and distort historical reality. Thus, all Germans cannot be characterized as Nazis nor should any nationality be reduced to a singular or one-dimensional description.

- *Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust*



- Most students express empathy for victims of mass murder. However, it is not uncommon for students to assume that the victims may have done something to justify the actions against them and, thus, to place inappropriate blame on the victims themselves. One helpful technique for engaging students in a discussion of the Holocaust is to think of the participants involved as belonging to one of four categories: victims, perpetrators, rescuers, and bystanders. Examine the actions, motives, and decisions of each group. Portray all individuals, including victims and perpetrators, as human beings who are capable of moral judgment and independent decision making.

As with any topic, students should make careful distinctions about sources of information. Students should be encouraged to consider why a particular text was written, who wrote it, who the intended audience was, whether there were any biases inherent in the information, whether any gaps occurred in discussion, whether omissions in certain passages were inadvertent or not, and how the information has been used to interpret various events. Because scholars often base their research on different bodies of information, varying interpretations of history can emerge. Consequently, all interpretations are subject to analytical evaluation. Strongly encourage your students to investigate carefully the origin and authorship of all material, particularly anything found on the Internet.

- *Avoid comparisons of pain*



- A study of the Holocaust should always highlight the different policies carried out by the Nazi regime toward various groups of people; however, these distinctions should not be presented as a basis for comparison of the level of suffering between those groups during the Holocaust. One cannot presume that the horror of an individual, family, or community destroyed by the Nazis was any greater than that experienced by victims of other genocides. Avoid generalizations that suggest exclusivity such as "the victims of the Holocaust suffered the most cruelty ever faced by a people in the history of humanity."

- *Do not romanticize history*



- People who risked their lives to rescue victims of Nazi oppression provide useful, important, and compelling role models for students. Given that only a small fraction of non-Jews under Nazi occupation helped to rescue Jews, an overemphasis on heroic tales in a unit on the Holocaust can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of the history. Similarly, in exposing students to the worst aspects of human nature as revealed in the history of the Holocaust, you run the risk of fostering cynicism in your students. Accuracy of fact along with a balanced perspective on the history must be a priority.

- *Contextualize the history*



- Events of the Holocaust and, particularly, how individuals and organizations behaved at that time, should be placed in historical context. The occurrence of the Holocaust must be studied in the context of European history as a whole to give students a perspective on the precedents and circumstances that may have contributed to it.

Similarly, study of the Holocaust should be viewed within a contemporaneous context, so students can begin to comprehend the circumstances that encouraged or discouraged particular actions or events. For example, when thinking about resistance, consider when and where an act took place; the immediate consequences to one's actions to self and family; the degree of control the Nazis had on a country or local population; the cultural attitudes of particular native populations historically toward different victim groups; and the availability and risk of potential hiding places.

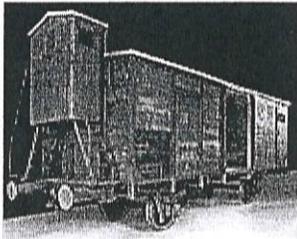
Encourage your students not to categorize groups of people only on the basis of their experiences during the Holocaust: contextualization is critical so that victims are not perceived only as victims. By exposing students to some of the cultural contributions and achievements of 2,000 years of European Jewish life, for example, you help them to balance their perception of Jews as victims and to better appreciate the traumatic disruption in Jewish history caused by the Holocaust.

- *Translate statistics into people*



- In any study of the Holocaust, the sheer number of victims challenges easy comprehension. Show that individual people—families of grandparents, parents, and children—are behind the statistics and emphasize that within the larger historical narrative is a diversity of personal experience. Precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims, first-person accounts and memoir literature provide students with a way of making meaning out of collective numbers and add individual voices to a collective experience.

- *Make responsible methodological choices*



- One of the primary concerns of educators teaching the history of the Holocaust is how to present horrific, historical images in a sensitive and appropriate manner. Graphic material should be used judiciously and only to the extent necessary to achieve the objective of the lesson. Try to select images and texts that do not exploit the students' emotional vulnerability or that might be construed as disrespectful of the victims themselves. Do not skip any of the suggested topics for study of the Holocaust because the visual images are too graphic. Use other approaches to address the material.

In studying complex human behavior, many teachers rely upon simulation exercises meant to help students "experience" unfamiliar situations. Even when great care is taken to prepare a class for such an activity, simulating experiences from the Holocaust remains pedagogically unsound. The activity may engage students, but they often forget the purpose of the lesson and, even worse, they are left with the impression that they now know what it was like to suffer or even to participate during the Holocaust. It is best to draw upon numerous primary sources, provide survivor testimony, and refrain from simulation games that lead to a trivialization of the subject matter.

Furthermore, word scrambles, crossword puzzles, counting objects, model building, and other gimmicky exercises tend not to encourage critical analysis but lead instead to low-level types of thinking and, in the case of Holocaust curricula, trivialization of the history. If the effects of a particular activity, even when popular with you and your students, run counter to the rationale for studying the history, then that activity should not be used.

## WHY DIDN'T PEOPLE JUST LEAVE?

Materials:

- Documentation Required for Emigration from Germany
- Documentation Required for Immigration Visas to Enter the United States
- Diary Entry of Klaus Langer from December 19, 1938

This exercise helps to explain to students the paper walls of the bureaucracy of immigration. Ask students the following....

- How long did it take all of these letters to get to these places?
- Look at the requirements to leave Germany—What do these documents tell you about immigration to the U.S. and the money that you need?
- References the Evian Conference
- Think about who is writing this?
- What details are included?
- How might you use this in your classroom?

# Teaching about the Holocaust

## *Documentation Required for Emigration from Germany*

After 1937, Jews needed the following documents from German authorities to leave the country.

- Passport
- Certificate from the local police noting the formal dissolution of residence in Germany
- Certificate from the Reich Ministry of Finance approving emigration, which required:
  - Payment of an emigration tax of 25 percent on total assets valued at more than 50,000 RM. This tax came due upon the dissolution of German residence.
  - Submission of an itemized list of all gifts made to third parties since January 1, 1931. If their value exceeded 10,000 RM, they were included in the calculation of the emigration tax.
  - Payment of a capital transfer tax of 25 percent (levied only on Jews) of assets in addition to the emigration tax.
  - Certification from the local tax office that there were no outstanding taxes due.
  - Certification from a currency exchange office that all currency regulations had been followed. An emigrant was permitted to take 2,000 RM or less in currency out of the country. Any remaining assets would be transferred into blocked bank accounts with restricted access.
- Customs declaration, dated no earlier than three days before departure, permitting the export of itemized personal and household goods. This declaration required:
  - Submission of a list, in triplicate, of all personal and household goods accompanying the emigrant stating their value. The list had to note items acquired before January 1, 1933, those acquired since January 1, 1933, and those acquired to facilitate emigration.
  - Documents attesting to the value of personal and household goods, and written explanations for the necessity of taking them out of the country.
  - Certification from a currency exchange office permitting the export of itemized personal and household goods, dated no earlier than 14 days before departure.

With the preceding documents, emigrants could leave Germany, if and only if they had valid travel arrangements and entrance visas for another country. After the union of Germany and Austria in March 1938, emigrants from Austria holding an Austrian passport had to apply for a German exit visa before they were permitted to leave the country.

## **Documents Required to Obtain a Visa to the United States**

The bureaucratic hurdles facing German Jews attempting to emigrate in the late 1930s were overwhelming. Nations required extensive documentation that was often virtually impossible to obtain. The following is a list of the documents required by the United States to obtain a visa.

- Five copies of the visa application
- Two copies of the applicant's birth certificate
- Quota number (establishing the applicant's place on the waiting list)

Two sponsors:

- Close relatives of the prospective immigrant were preferred
- The sponsors were required to be US citizens or to have permanent resident status, and they were required to have completed and notarized six copies of an Affidavit of Support and Sponsorship

Supporting documents:

- Certified copy of most recent federal tax return
- Affidavit from a bank regarding applicant's accounts
- Affidavit from any other responsible person regarding other assets (affidavit from sponsor's employer or statement of commercial rating)

Certificate of Good Conduct from German Police authorities, including two copies of each:

- Police dossier
- Prison record
- Military record
- Other government records about individual

Affidavits of Good Conduct (after September 1940) from several responsible disinterested persons

Physical examination at US consulate

Proof of permission to leave Germany (imposed September 30, 1939)

Proof that prospective immigrant had booked passage to the Western hemisphere (imposed September 1939)

## **Diary Entry of Klaus Langer from December 19, 1938**

“Regarding the emigration of my parents I have the following to report. First came two refusals from Argentina for lack of letters of credit. The rich uncle in America is unable to assume such financial responsibility. We don’t have an affidavit for the U.S. India requires firm employment there, or a contract. Father is now trying to make connections in India to obtain a contract. He also wrote to Peru and he was told to go to the Uruguayan consulate. Allegedly they Dominican Republic would take ten thousand Jews and provide them with visas. However, nothing further is known about that. It probably makes no sense to turn to them. However, with a Dominican Republic visa it is possible to get a half-year visa for Palestine. Shanghai also accepts Jews, even without a visa, but it is questionable how one can live there. The mail also brought no news from Palestine. We had submitted a request for a *commercial certification*.”

Zapruder, A. (ed.). (2002). “Salvaged Pages. Young Writers’ Diaries of the Holocaust.” New Haven: Yale University Press.

## Journal

**Read the following excerpts from the play. Discuss the content of each excerpt. Read the Journal Prompts and take 15 minutes to write in your journals, responding to the quotes in light of Anne's words.**

### *Excerpt One*

ANNE: I couldn't sleep tonight, even after Father tucked me in and said my prayers with me. I feel wicked sleeping in a warm bed when my friends are at the mercy of the cruelest monsters ever to walk the earth. And all because they're Jews. We assume most of them are murdered. The BBC says they're being gassed. Perhaps that's the quickest way to die. Fine specimens of humanity, those Germans, and to think I'm actually one of them! No, that's not true, Hitler took our nationality away long ago.

### *Excerpt Two*

ANNE: Tonight, after the radio broadcast, Pim asked what was the first thing we wanted to do when we're liberated. For me, I'd be so thrilled I wouldn't know where to begin. I long to be back in school with my friends, ride a bike, swim, whistle, laugh so hard it hurts. I wonder if anyone will ever not think about whether I'm Jewish, and just see me as a teenager badly in need of some good plain fun.

### *Journal Prompts*

"All the people like us are we, and everyone else is they."

Rudyard Kipling

"A lie, repeated often enough, eventually gains acceptance."

Josef Goebbels

"Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren't born."

Ervin Staub

**\* Teacher Note: Asking students to respond to these journal prompts in context to their particular school environment is a good jumping off point to making a connection with a particular society/government that started a genocide through classification of different groups.**

### **Why should students keep a journal?**

- \* A journal can serve as an avenue of expression about a powerful subject such as the Holocaust, especially if students don't have the opportunity or feel uncomfortable expressing themselves in class.
- \* A journal can set up a personal dialogue between student and teacher, as students will often express themselves more seriously and thoughtfully in writing as opposed to speaking in front of a classroom full of their peers.
- \* A journal can create opportunities for genuine reflection about both the universal ideas and individual experiences within this subject matter and offer greater understanding of both through written expression.
- \* A journal can serve as a creative outlet for students to create poetry, songs, and drawings in response to studying about the Holocaust.

# Assessing Responsibility Activity

Discuss with your students the term “responsibility”; define what the term “responsibility” means. Divide the students into groups and ask them to pretend they are judges and have to assess the “responsibility” of people’s actions during the Holocaust. Cut out the attached cards and pass them around so that each group has several cards. Explain that they are to work in their groups assessing the “responsibility” of the people listed on their group cards for what happened during the Holocaust. Together the group must categorize the “responsibility” of each person described on each card and sort it into one of the following categories:

1. Not Responsible
2. Minimally Responsible
3. Responsible
4. Very Responsible

After determining the level of “responsibility”, the groups should work to determine what penalty, if any, they will assign to each person on the card?

1. One of Hitler's direct subordinates, such as Heinrich Himmler or Joseph Goebbels	11. A person who voluntarily joined the Nazis in the 1930s
2. A German who voluntarily joined Hitler's special elite, the SS	12. A person who agreed to publicly take the Civil Servant Loyalty Oath (swearing eternal allegiance to Adolf Hitler in 1934)
3. A German industrialist who financially supported Hitler's rise to power and continued to support him verbally	13. A person who complied with the law excluding Jews from economic and social life
4. A judge who carried out Hitler's decrees for sterilization of the "mentally incompetent" and internment of "traitors"	14. A person who regularly, enthusiastically attended Hitler rallies
5. A doctor who participated in sterilization of Jews	15. A person who always respectfully gave the "Heil Hitler" salute
6. A worker in a plant making Zyklon B gas	16. A person who served as a concentration camp guard
7. The Pope, who made no public statement against Nazi policy	17. A person who turned the lever to allow the gas into the chambers
8. An industrialist who made enormous profits by producing Zyklon B gas	18. A driver of the trains that went to the concentration camps
9. A manufacturer who used concentration camp inmates as slave labor in his plants	19. A diplomat for the Nazi government
10. An American industrialist who helped arm Hitler in the 1930s	20. The American Government, which limited emigration of Jews to the U.S. in the 1930s

21. The "little guy" who claimed "he doesn't get involved in politics" and thus went about his business as quietly as he could in the Hitler regime	26. The policeman who helped round up escaping Jews
22. The soldier who carried out orders to roust Jews from their homes for "evacuation and resettlement"	27. A teacher who taught Nazi propaganda
23. The German couple who took up residence in a home evacuated by Jews	28. Children who joined the Hitler Youth
24. The non-Jews who took over a store just abandoned by Jews	29. Parents who sent or allowed their children to attend Hitler Youth meetings
25. The German who refused all pleas to participate in hiding and smuggling of Jews	30. The Protestant clergyman who gave to the Nazis lists of members of his congregation who were "non-Aryan."

<b>1. NOT RESPONSIBLE</b>	<b>3. RESPONSIBLE</b>
<b>2. MINIMALLY RESPONSIBLE</b>	<b>4. VERY RESPONSIBLE</b>

## **The Power of Responsibility in the Holocaust and the Age of Genocide**

### **Assessing Responsibility during the Holocaust**

WRITING EXERCISE: Reflect on the statement below by Kimel. Using this sheet, please write a brief essay explaining what this statement means to you.

**PROMPT: “Accepting of responsibility makes for a better society. So, what must I do to make things better for people now and in the future? Is mere acknowledgement of a wrong and guilt with an expression of sorrow sufficient or is there more?” ---Kimel**

## What can you do to make a difference?

- Learn the facts about the Holocaust and other genocides and talk with others about this history. These Web sites will help you do this.
  - [The Committee on Conscience at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)
  - [Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust](#)
  - [Genocide Intervention Network](#)
  - [Save Darfur](#)
  - [Student Anti-Genocide Coalition](#)
  - [Enough: The Project to End Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity](#)
  
- View films about genocides or host screenings. Some recommended films include "The Killing Fields" (Cambodia), "Sometimes in April" (Rwanda), "Hotel Rwanda" (Rwanda) and "Darfur Diaries" (Darfur).
- Keep informed about what is happening in places facing genocide threats. Many of the sites above include an opportunity to receive weekly updates via e-mail.
- Read the "[Report of the Genocide Prevention Task Force](#)," which sets out a blueprint for U.S. policymakers on genocide and mass atrocity prevention.
- [Write](#) to your representatives in Congress about what you want them to do in terms of preventing genocide. Many of the Web sites listed above provide advocacy advice you may want to read and use.
- Write an [op-ed article](#) or letter to the editor of your local newspaper.
- Raise funds for an organization providing relief for those facing humanitarian crises in the face of genocide. Some ideas could include hosting a "Dinner for Darfur," sell T-shirts, set up a donation box at your school or place of worship or ask your school to host a "Battle of the Bands" contest and donate the admission fee.
- Start a [STAND: Students Against Genocide Chapter](#) at your school.
- Encourage your school to adopt anti-genocide curricular materials for both its library and its classrooms.
- Ask your local bookseller and library to display books about genocide and mass atrocities.

*Email [Danielle.kahane-kaminsky@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:Danielle.kahane-kaminsky@vanderbilt.edu) submissions of original Holocaust and Genocide prevention ideas or successful projects. Selected submissions will be published on the Commission's TeacherTube website. Schools will be recognized at the Annual Day of Remembrance in the State Senate Chambers.*



*Dear Teacher,*

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by LEARNED engineers

Children poisoned by EDUCATED physicians

Infants killed by TRAINED nurses

Women and babies shot and burned by HIGH SCHOOL and COLLEGE graduates.

So I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane.

-Haim Ginott

*Let all generations remember...*

[www.tennesseeholocaustcommission.org](http://www.tennesseeholocaustcommission.org)