

Historical Context in Holocaust Education

In your effort to provide historical context for the study of the Holocaust it is essential that students see the basis for and the evolution of Nazi policy and aggression. By taking the time to establish this context for Auschwitz and the Final Solution students will gain a more accurate and complete understanding of the political and social system that created the Holocaust, the people who were affected by it, and the way of life that was destroyed by it.

To assist you in this effort we have identified the following themes which will help you structure a chronological and systematic approach to your unit. Realistically, given time constraints and curriculum demands, every teacher will not be able to address each concept in depth. Wherever possible, though, students should be introduced to the concepts listed below and have a chronological framework for the events from 1933-1945. Reproducible timelines for classroom use are available at <http://www.mchekc.org/Timelines.htm>.

Two general resources that you will find helpful in all content areas are the books **Tell Them We Remember** and **The World Must Know**. Both are appropriate for 7th-12th grade students and have a classroom-friendly format of short readings and compelling visuals to reinforce historical points. In the following pages you will find a topical breakdown of the recommended content areas and teaching ideas which will help you teach that subject matter to your students.

We also recommend that you visit the curriculum section and the primary source section of our website as you plan your unit.

<http://www.mchekc.org/CurriculumUnits.htm>

<http://www.mchekc.org/PrimarySourceDocuments.htm>

Core Concepts in Holocaust Education:

1. Jewish Life Before the Holocaust
2. Antisemitism
3. Germany and the Rise of Nazism
4. 1933-1939: “The Limited Solution” - Persecution and the Racial State
5. 1939-1941: “The Situational Solutions” - Ghettos and *Einsatzgruppen*
6. 1941-1945: The Final Solution
7. Jewish Responses to the Holocaust
8. Non-Jewish Responses to the Holocaust
9. Liberation and Aftermath

Jewish Life before the Holocaust

An understanding of the rich 1,500 year history of the European Jewish community is essential to an understanding the human suffering of the Holocaust. Far from being a homogeneous group, European Jews were assimilated at different levels into their national cultures, practiced their religion with varying degrees of observance, spoke different languages, practiced different professions and lived unique lives with their families. Giving students a glimpse of the diversity of the Jewish community shows the Jews as a living culture rather than focusing on victimization, personalizes the experience of the Holocaust, and serves to dispel past and present stereotypes of Jews.

A study of prewar Jewish life will also help you address the following USHMM Guidelines For Teaching the Holocaust:

- Avoid simple answers to complex history
- Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable
- Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions
- Contextualize the history you are teaching
- Translate statistics into people
- Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust

Relevant topics might include:

- Diversity of Jewish cultural life prior to the Holocaust
- Jewish religious observance and levels of nationalism and assimilation

Antisemitism

Anti-Jewish sentiment and violent pogroms span all of European history and geography. Nazi policy toward the Jews built on this long tradition of persecution. By studying the Christian roots of antisemitism and examining the gradual shift from religious to secular persecution of the Jews, students will begin to understand the cultural climate that informed perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders and victims through the Holocaust.

A study of antisemitism will also help you address the following USHMM Guidelines For Teaching the Holocaust:

- Avoid simple answers to complex history
- Strive for precision of language
- Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions
- Contextualize the history you are teaching

Relevant topics might include:

- Christian anti-Judaism
- 19th Century racial and political antisemitism
- Antisemitic propaganda

Germany and the Rise of Nazism

The cultural, political, and economic consequences of World War I and the interwar period in Germany have direct bearing on the eventual rise of the Nazi Party and the creation of a totalitarian state. By studying these topics, students will be able to understand how the Nazis accumulated power and utilized the bureaucratic machinery of the state against their enemies.

A study of Germany and the Rise of Nazism will also help you address the following USHMM Guidelines For Teaching the Holocaust:

- Define the term Holocaust
- Avoid simple answers to complex history
- Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable
- Strive for precision of language
- Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions
- Contextualize the history you are teaching

Relevant topics might include:

- The end of WWI and the Versailles Treaty
- The Weimar Republic
- Worldwide depression, economics, reparations
- Rise of nationalism
- Life in Germany 1919-1933
- Adolf Hitler
- Totalitarian state - dictatorship

1933-1939: “The Limited Solution” - Persecution and the Racial State

Under Hitler’s leadership German, Austrian and Czech Jews and others endured persecution in the form of physical violence, economic boycotts, and laws to strip them of their rights before WWII even began. Controlled by the Nazi party, this system of persecution utilized propaganda and the legislative system to gain acceptance by the German public. Students should understand the seemingly small steps that cumulatively stripped the Jews and others of their rights.

A study of the years 1933-1939 will also help you address the following USHMM Guidelines For Teaching the Holocaust:

- Define the term Holocaust
- Avoid comparisons of pain
- Avoid simple answers to complex history
- Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable
- Strive for precision of language
- Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions
- Contextualize the history you are teaching

Relevant topics might include:

- Racial Science
- Antisemitic propaganda
- Nuremberg Laws
- Other victims of Nazi persecution
- The *St. Louis*
- *Kristallnacht*

1939-1941: “The Situational Solutions” - Ghettos and *Einsatzgruppen*

The outbreak of World War II radicalized Nazi policy toward the Jews of Europe. No longer able to encourage immigration and having conquered the home countries of millions more Jews, the Nazis sought to find a new solution to the “Jewish Question.” This period marks the end of Jewish family life and the Nazis’ initial attempts to create a process to murder Jews. For students this period offers a chance to study not only the Nazi attempts to perfect a solution to the “Jewish Question” but also the final attempts of Jewish men, women and children to normalize their situation and live as families and communities.

A study of the years 1939 - 1941 will also help you address the following USHMM Guidelines For Teaching the Holocaust:

- Avoid simple answers to complex history
- Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable
- Strive for precision of language
- Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions
- Contextualize the history you are teaching
- Translate statistics into people
- Be sensitive to appropriate written and audiovisual content

Relevant topics might include:

- World War II
- Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact
- Ghetto life
- Operation Barbarossa
- *Einsatzgruppen* actions

1941-1945: The Final Solution

The state-sponsored program to murder all European Jews beginning in 1942 is one of the most widely studied aspects of the Holocaust. The creation of six death camps, the use of gas chambers, and the complicity of vast numbers of people to allow the murder to happen are central issues in every study of the Holocaust. Despite the importance of this study, teachers are encouraged to spend time creating a context for the Final Solution before mentioning or reading about the killing operations.

A study of the Final Solution will also help you address the following USHMM Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust:

- Define the term Holocaust
- Avoid comparisons of pain
- Avoid simple answers to complex history
- Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable
- Strive for precision of language
- Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions
- Contextualize the history you are teaching
- Translate statistics into people
- Be sensitive to appropriate written and audiovisual content
- Select appropriate learning activities

Relevant topics might include:

- Wannsee Conference
- Deportation
- Six Death Camps
- Survivors

Jewish and Non-Jewish Responses to the Holocaust

Responses to the Holocaust took many forms. The Jews themselves reacted to radicalized Nazi policy in a variety of ways including armed and spiritual resistance. Collaborators and bystanders in Germany and throughout occupied Europe made decisions about their actions. Nazi perpetrators made decisions and reacted to events as they happened. Rescuers risked their own lives to save the lives of neighbors and of complete strangers. World governments made policy decisions about emigration, intervention, and the war. Students will benefit from understanding that far from being an inevitable consequence of history, the Holocaust was defined by choices made throughout the world – in some cases to act and in others to remain silent.

A study of responses to the Holocaust will also help you address the following USHMM Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust:

- Avoid simple answers to complex history
- Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable
- Strive for precision of language
- Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions
- Do not romanticize history to engage students' interest
- Contextualize the history you are teaching

Relevant topics might include:

- U.S. and World response
- Evian Conference
- Resistance and survival in the Jewish community
- Rescuers
- Collaborators and bystanders

Liberation and Aftermath

Liberation in 1945 did not bring a happy end to the Holocaust. Too often students walk away from a unit on the Holocaust thinking that the survivors who lived to see liberation simply walked away from the camps and into their new lives. By studying liberation, the turmoil of post-WWII Europe and the displaced persons camps students gain insight into what survivors still had to endure even after the immediate threat to their lives was eliminated. Similarly, by looking at the debates about justice and the trials after the Holocaust, students can begin to see that the Holocaust led to the formation of an international legal framework for dealing with genocides.

A study of liberation and aftermath will also help you address the following USHMM Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust:

- Avoid comparisons of pain
- Avoid simple answers to complex history
- Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable
- Strive for precision of language
- Make careful distinctions about sources of information
- Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions
- Do not romanticize history to engage students' interest
- Contextualize the history you are teaching
- Reinforce the objectives of your lesson plan

Relevant topics might include:

- Death marches
- Liberation experiences
- Displaced Persons camps
- Nuremberg Trials and Eichmann Trial
- Justice
- Survivors
- Genocide since the Holocaust
- The United Nations and the Genocide Convention

Overarching Ideas and Themes

- Utilizing local survivor testimony as a basis for research or to follow one individual through the unit. Resources include:
 - From the Heart (book)
 - The Holocaust: Through Our Own Eyes (VHS or DVD)
 - Mosaic of Memories (powerpoint presentation given by MCHE volunteer)
 - MCHE Survivor Archive videos (DVD)
 - Second Generation Classroom Speakers Bureau
- Choose one local survivor and follow their story as a class throughout the Holocaust unit
- Incorporate photographs of the topic throughout the unit
- Incorporate art and visuals into the unit wherever possible
 - A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust - <http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/arts/art.htm>
 - Auschwitz: Then and Now - <http://www.remember.org/then-and-now/index.html>
 - CHGS - http://www.chgs.umn.edu/Visual_Artistic_Resources/visual_artistic_resources.html
 - Remembering Catastrophe: The Nazi Camps Today - <http://faculty.berea.edu/gowlers/remembering>
 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum - <http://www.ushmm.org/research/collections/photo/>
 - Virtual Tour of Auschwitz-Birkenau - <http://www.remember.org/auschwitz/>
 - Yad Vashem - http://www1.yadvashem.org/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/home_auschwitz_album.html