

LESSON: Overview of the Holocaust (4-Day Lesson)

GRADE LEVEL: Recommended for grades 9–12

SUBJECT: Multidisciplinary

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 160–180 minutes (extensions available)

This is a *foundational* lesson that introduces key concepts and information to students.

RATIONALE

Teachers and students will understand key concepts about how and why the Holocaust happened. Students will analyze how and why the Nazis and their collaborators persecuted and murdered Jews as well as other people targeted in the era of the Holocaust. By providing a concise overview of the Holocaust and those involved, this lesson is intended to provoke reflection and discussion about the role of ordinary people and institutions between 1933 and 1945.

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What was the Holocaust?
- How and why did the Holocaust happen?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students will understand:

- Who the Nazis were and what they believed
- Why the Nazis and their collaborators systematically targeted Jewish people and others
- What actions the Nazis and their collaborators took to persecute and then murder the Jewish people of Europe
- The range of experiences of Jewish people in different times and places in Europe during the Holocaust
- How World War II changed what the Nazis were able to do during the Holocaust
- Who some of the Jewish men, women, and children were who were murdered in the Holocaust

TEACHER PREPARATION

- Required or recommended teacher reading for this lesson
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia article [Introduction to the Holocaust](#)
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia article [Antisemitism](#)
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia article [Nazi Racism](#)
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia article [Victims of the Nazi Era: Nazi Racial Ideology](#)
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia article [How did Nazis and their collaborators implement the Holocaust?](#)
 - Holocaust Encyclopedia article [How and why did ordinary people across Europe contribute to the persecution of their Jewish neighbors?](#)
- Optional teacher background reading

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- Holocaust Encyclopedia article [What conditions and ideas made the Holocaust possible?](#)
- Holocaust Encyclopedia article [What does war make possible?](#)
- [Timeline Lesson Materials](#) (.zip file download, 44.3MB)
- Student Materials

Days 1 and 2 of this lesson use a 38-minute documentary paired with short biographies of Holocaust victims and survivors as the primary tools for student learning. The documentary is streamed on the Museum's website via YouTube and includes some graphic imagery. Teachers are encouraged to preview the film and obtain school permission, if required, for student viewing. [DVD](#) copies of the film are also available by request. Days 3 and 4 use primary sources and individual accounts to deepen student understanding of how and why the Holocaust happened with particular emphasis on ordinary people as active participants or passive witnesses to persecution and murder.

 - Worksheet: [KWL Chart](#)
 - Video: [Path to Nazi Genocide](#) w/[transcript](#) (38 minutes; video is subtitled in 10 languages)
 - Reading: [Profile Cards](#)
 - Reading: Holocaust Encyclopedia article [Introduction to the Holocaust](#)
 - Reading: Holocaust Encyclopedia article [How did Nazis and their collaborators implement the Holocaust?](#)
 - Reading Holocaust Encyclopedia article [How and why did ordinary people across Europe contribute to the persecution of their Jewish neighbors?](#)
 - Primary Source Packet (see Day 3)
 - [Glossary](#) of terms (optional)
 - On Jews and [Judaism](#) (optional)

MODIFICATIONS

Technology and teaching strategies are suggested in the instructional sequence; however, the lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve the educational outcomes. [Padlet](#), [FlipGrid](#), [Mentimeter](#), [Nearpod](#), and [Peardeck](#) for Google Slides -- for example -- may all be used effectively to visually record and display student responses.

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS

This lesson requires a significant amount of reading, vocabulary, and cognitive engagement in a short amount of time. For learners with cognitive challenges and/or English Language Learners, consider:

- Instructional structured reminders, extra time, modified reading, pre-teaching vocabulary or highlighted vocabulary terms, pre-annotated notes
- If equipped, audio versions or text reader accessible versions of reading assignments for students with reading challenges.

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PART ONE: PRE-LESSON ASSIGNMENT

1. Ask students to read about one individual in the Holocaust by assigning one card to pairs of students from the following 15 [profile cards](#). Ask them to underline or digitally highlight the major events that impacted that person's experience during the Holocaust.

Teacher note: These cards are excerpted from a larger USHMM [Timeline Activity Lesson](#). Highlighted dates in the cards indicate the year on which the person's card would be placed on the larger timeline. Teachers may also choose to post or share in digital format the [Historical Events](#) and/or [Laws and Decrees](#) from this lesson to provide context.

PART TWO: LESSON

DAY ONE

Introduction

1. Explain that in this lesson, students will address two essential questions:

What was the Holocaust?

How and why did the Holocaust happen?

2. Ask students to create a working definition of the Holocaust.
3. Ask students to complete a [KWL](#) chart (students may work in pairs).

ASK THE STUDENTS

- What do you know about the Holocaust?
- What do you want to know about the Holocaust?

4. Use a padlet to review, record, and discuss the KWL charts.

Definitions

1. Provide the following USHMM definition of the Holocaust and post for reference.

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The Holocaust was the **systematic, state-sponsored** persecution and murder of approximately six million European **Jews** by the **Nazi** regime and its **collaborators** in the years leading up to and during **World War II**. During the era of the Holocaust (1933-1945), German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived “racial inferiority”: **Roma** (Gypsies), **disabled persons**, and some of the **Slavic peoples** (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them **Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses**, and **homosexuals**.

2. Ask students: Were there elements missing in the definition you created? What parts of this Museum definition do you have questions about?
3. Explain to students that they will hear the words **Nazi racial ideology** and **antisemitism** in the film they are about to watch. Review the definitions below.
 - **Antisemitism**: prejudice against or hatred of Jewish people.
 - **Nazi racial ideology**: belief that the world was divided up into competing inferior and superior races, each struggling for survival and dominance. Successful races maintained racial purity, reproduced to expand and strengthen the race-nation, and conquered territory and resources at the expense of inferior races. In the Nazis’ eyes, Jews were not a religious denomination, but a dangerous non-European “race.”

Refer to the [Nazi Racism](#) and [Antisemitism](#) encyclopedia articles to answer additional questions.

View Film

1. Watch [The Path to Nazi Genocide](#), chapters 1 - 3 **(24 minutes)**
As students view the film, ask them to answer questions 1-7 (short answer questions only) on the accompanying [worksheet](#) (an [answer key](#) is provided for teachers).
 - Ch.1 [Aftermath of WWI and the Rise of Nazism 1918-33](#) **(12 minutes)**
 - Pause for whole group check in
 - Group/Pair Share to answer the questions that students find the most challenging. (Short questions 1-3)
 - Ch. 2 [Building a National Community 1933-36](#) **(6 minutes)**
 - Pause for whole group check in
 - Group/Pair Share to answer the questions that students find the most challenging. (Short answer questions 4-5)
 - Ch. 3 [From Citizens to Outcasts 1933-38](#) **(6 minutes)**
 - Pause for whole group check in

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- Group/Pair Share to answer the questions that students find the most challenging. (Short answer questions 6-7)

Teacher note: Acknowledge that studying the Holocaust can be emotional. Ask students to reflect on the film and allow space for discussion of emotional reactions and challenges of studying this difficult history. When the film concludes students may post reactions on a padlet or in a journal.

Introduce Homework

1. Read and annotate the USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia article: [Introduction to the Holocaust](#). (can be printed and distributed in hard copy or assigned as link)

ASK THE STUDENTS

- Underline or highlight words that require clarification, and use the KWL chart to fill in new content that you have learned and record questions raised by the article that you would like to explore further.
- Reflect on how particular aspects of the Holocaust affected the person in your profile card. Use the Path to Nazi Genocide video transcript and the encyclopedia article to support your observations.

Teacher note: Resources like Padlet or FlipGrid may be used for students to post their homework responses for reference at the beginning of the next day's lesson.

DAY TWO

Review Homework

1. Begin class with the students' homework responses by asking students to share at least one of their responses from the homework with the class.

Teacher note: If students used FlipGrid to post their homework responses, make sure the comment feature is turned on; so, students may post their own findings and comment on the responses of other students in the class. This enables the teacher to begin class with students discussing each other's responses and questions.

View Film

1. Acknowledge for students that the content in today's video (Chapter 4) may be difficult. Ask students to reflect on the film after viewing and allow space for discussion of emotional reactions and challenges of studying this difficult history. While it is important to understand what happened and think about why it happened, it can be hard to watch and grapple with the reality and the magnitude of the suffering.

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Teacher note: In some classes, you may choose to omit the section with graphic film footage of a killing operation (minutes 4:43 to 5:40).

2. Watch [The Path to Nazi Genocide \(Chapter 4: World War II and the Holocaust 1939-45\)](#).
 - As students view the film, ask them to answer questions 8-9 on the accompanying [worksheet](#) (an [answer key](#) is provided for teachers).
 - When the film concludes, consider checking in as a group; students may post reactions on a padlet or in a journal.
3. Students may review their worksheet answers in pairs to support small group or whole class discussion in classrooms or online break out rooms.
4. Discuss as a whole group questions raised by Chapter 4 of the film as well as those generated from the homework assignment.

Teacher note: Students may choose at this time to take a gallery walk or review the digital version of the [Historical Events](#) or [Laws and Decrees](#) from the [Timeline Lesson](#) to reinforce learning from the film.

5. Students share stories from their profile cards.

ASK THE STUDENTS

- How was each person's life impacted by events you saw in the film?
- What can we learn by looking at a single person's experiences? (*Sample answers: Each individual's experience was different depending on time, place, family, or opportunities available to them. It can be difficult to comprehend what happened to so many people and easier when we can just look at only a few. Survival depended on chance in many circumstances.*)
- What do the individual stories reveal about the Holocaust that the film and encyclopedia article did not?

Introduce Homework

1. Read and annotate the USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia article: [How did the Nazis and their collaborators implement the Holocaust?](#) (can be printed and distributed in hard copy or assigned as a link)

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ASK THE STUDENTS

- How does this article deepen your understanding of the actions that the Nazis and their collaborators took to persecute and then murder the Jewish people of Europe?
- Underline or highlight words that require clarification, and use the KWL chart to fill in new content that you have learned and identify any remaining questions you would like to know more about.

Teacher note: Resources like Padlet or FlipGrid may be used for students to post their homework responses for reference at the beginning of the next day's lesson.

DAY THREE

Review Homework

1. Begin class with the students' homework responses by asking students to share at least one of their responses from the homework with the class. Review what they have learned so far. As a class, address the questions introduced on Day One.

ASK THE STUDENTS

- Who were the [Nazis](#) and what did they believe?
- [Why](#) did the Nazis and their collaborators systematically target Jews and others?
- How did [individual Jewish people](#) experience these events?
- How did [World War II](#) change what the Nazis were able to do?

Primary Source Analysis

1. Explain to students that today they will delve deeper into the following questions:

ASK THE STUDENTS

- What actions did the Nazis and their collaborators take to persecute and then murder Jewish people in Europe?
 - In what ways were ordinary people active participants or passive witnesses to persecution and eventually murder?
2. Present the class with seven categories that identify actions the Nazis and their collaborators took to persecute and then murder the Jewish people of Europe. (Corresponding packets are numbered in random order for the purposes of the activity.)

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- [Antisemitic Propaganda](#) (Packet 5)
- [Exclusion and Legal Discrimination](#) (Packet 4)
- [Physical Separation and Ghettos](#) (Packet 2)
- [Theft and Confiscation of Property](#) (Packet 6)
- [Deportation](#) (Packet 1)
- [Concentration Camps and Forced Labor](#) (Packet 7)
- [Mass Killing](#) (Packet 3)

Teacher note: These can be organized as gallery walk “stations,” posted on the wall or as part of a padlet. However, DO NOT reveal to students which packet number corresponds to each category.

3. Each of these categories is linked to several primary sources. Assign pairs of students to examine one set of the primary sources (survivor testimony and/or a document or photograph) either in hard copy and/or digital formats, but DO NOT tell them which category they have received. ([Answer key with additional reference links](#))

ASK THE STUDENTS (WORKING IN PAIRS)

- Which aspect of the Holocaust (list above) do your primary sources best represent? (Move your assets under the corresponding category on the classroom or digital wall.)
- What do your primary sources reveal about the ways that ordinary people were active participants or passive witnesses to persecution and even murder during the Holocaust?

4. If time permits, facilitate a gallery walk or share documents digitally for students to become familiar with the range of primary sources associated with the topics that their classmates will present.
5. Based on their answers to the questions investigated in their pairings, ask each student to share at least one observation about how the primary sources help us better understand how the Holocaust happened.

Teacher note: This can be done in a literary circle format for ELA classes.

Introduce Homework

1. Read and annotate the USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia article [How and why did ordinary people across Europe contribute to the persecution of their Jewish neighbors?](#) (can be printed and distributed in hard copy or assigned as link)

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ASK THE STUDENTS

- Cite three examples of ways that ordinary people were active participants or passive witnesses to persecution and eventually murder?
- What pressures and motivations may have influenced the decisions and actions of ordinary people during the Holocaust?
- Underline or highlight words that require clarification, and use the KWL chart to fill in new content that you have learned and identify any remaining questions you would like to know more about.

Teacher note: Resources like Padlet or FlipGrid may be used for students to post their homework responses for reference at the beginning of the next day's lesson.

DAY FOUR

Review Homework

1. Begin class with the students' homework responses by asking students to share at least one of their responses from the homework with the class. What information in the homework reading was new or surprising?

Connecting Individual Stories to the History

1. Ask students to return to their individual profile cards and the aspects of the Holocaust they studied on day three (antisemitic propaganda, exclusion and legal discrimination, physical separation and ghettos, theft and confiscation of property, deportation, concentration camps and forced labor, mass killing).

ASK THE STUDENTS

- Which aspects of the Holocaust that you studied had the greatest impact on your individual?
- Does your profile card mention ordinary people, such as neighbors, friends, or strangers? What role did they play in your person's experiences during the Holocaust?

[Answer key for profile cards](#)

Teacher note: if using the [Timeline Activity Historical Events](#) and [Laws And Decrees](#) to contextualize this lesson, students can now place their profile cards on the timeline at the place where the individual experienced Nazi persecution and note the WW2 events and corresponding laws/decrees near the date.

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Closing Discussion or Writing Prompt

1. Ask students to develop a thesis statement utilizing their findings and annotations from the film, the articles, the documents, and the profile cards that answers the following question: .

How and why did the Holocaust happen?

Teacher note: This may be done as a class project, but it may also be helpful to begin in pairs or small groups to process all of the information.

(Students should consider the impact of antisemitism; Nazi racial ideology; propaganda; political and economic unrest following World War I; Nazi territorial control during World War II; the range of pressures and personal motivations influencing the actions of witnesses and collaborators, among other things.)

If students require additional prompts to facilitate responses to the question consider:

- What challenges did Germany face at the end of WWI and during the 1920s? Which may have felt most threatening to many Germans?
- Were there warning signs of what was to come before the Nazis came to power in 1933? Before the start of mass killing in 1941?
- How did professionals and others working in German society who were not related to the actual physical mistreatment of minorities contribute to persecution and even murder?
- What attitudes, conditions, and beliefs in Europe may have made it easier to ignore or go along with persecution and murder?
- What are some of the motives and pressures that led so many individuals to persecute, to murder, or to abandon their fellow human beings?

Exit Ticket

1. Return to the KWL chart and fill in any new content that you have learned and identify any remaining questions you would like to learn more about.
 - Are there questions about the Holocaust that have not been addressed? Invite students to explore the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#) to investigate remaining questions.

CONCLUSION

ASSESSMENT

Listen to the 15-minute podcast episode, [Holocaust Survivors' Reflections and Hopes for the Future](#).

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ASK THE STUDENTS

- Select the passage that resonates the most for you (note the time code), and explain why.
- Form an opinion and create a claim about what you believe can be learned from studying the Holocaust; cite evidence from the film, encyclopedia article, and profile cards to support your argument.
 - Why do you think it is important to study how and why the Holocaust happened?
 - What do you think people can learn from it?

OPTIONAL: Read more about the person whose passage you chose (see links below).

- How does the person's experiences during the Holocaust illustrate aspects of the history that you learned about in the lesson?
- How were their experiences the same or different than those you learned about from the profile cards?

BIOGRAPHIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

Listed in the order that they appear in the podcast episode

- Learn more about [George Pick](#)
- Learn more about [Charlene Schiff](#)
- Learn more about [Martin Weiss](#)
- Learn more about [Nesse Godin](#)
- Learn more about [Susan Taube](#)
- Learn more about [Louise Lawrence-Israels](#)
- Learn more about [Fritz Gluckstein](#)
- Learn more about [Regina Spiegel](#)
- Learn more about [Estelle Laughlin](#)
- Learn more about [Henry Greenbaum](#)

EXTENSIONS

1. Deepen understanding of core topics, and further integrate this introduction to the Holocaust into Social Studies and English/Language Arts curricula. Options include further exploration of [Nazi Racism](#), [Antisemitism](#), [American responses](#), [Rescue & Survival in Hiding](#), [Resistance](#), and [pre-World War II Jewish life](#), as well as additional lessons exploring the [role of individuals](#) during the Holocaust.
2. With the growing availability of books, films, and website content about the Holocaust, choosing the right resource for classroom use can be difficult. The Museum offers a [bibliography and videography](#) of selected resources with grade levels and Lexile Scores noted when available. It includes diaries, memoirs, secondary

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sources, literature, graphic novels, and films. This resource is not intended to be comprehensive but to serve as a starting point. In addition, to help teachers make sound teaching resource decisions beyond those listed in the bibliography and videography, the Museum offers a [resource evaluation rubric](#).