



INVESTIGATING THE HOLOCAUST THROUGH HISTORICAL THINKING

The six interrelated historical thinking concepts are used to frame learning around historical events and help students deepen their understanding with a multi-layered approach. The concepts were developed by the Historical Thinking Project, which was directed by Dr. Peter Seixas at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Seixas believed that, together, these six concepts form the foundation of historical inquiry.

► HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPTS

1. Establish *historical significance*
2. Use *primary source evidence*
3. Identify *continuity and change*
4. Analyze *cause and consequence*
5. Take *historical perspectives*
6. Understand the *ethical dimension* of historical interpretations

When educators approach the subject of the Holocaust with their students, it may be helpful to use the six historical thinking concepts as a framework. The historical thinking concepts connect directly to curricular learning around the Holocaust, in addition to strengthening the skills needed for social studies courses.



► HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPTS: EXPLAINED

How do we decide what is important to learn about the past?

The concept of **historical significance** helps students make choices about what to remember by providing criteria to consider. An event, person or development is significant if it resulted in change, meaning that it “had deep consequences, for many people, over a long period of time.”¹ Or, it is significant if it reveals something important to us about “enduring or emerging issues in history or contemporary life.”² Beyond these criteria, establishing historical significance means recognizing the way that historical narratives are constructed by people (such as the author of a textbook), who use these pieces of the past to build their story. What people consider to be significant varies over time.

How do we know what we know?

When examining **primary source evidence**, historians begin by identifying what the source is, who made it, when, where, why and for whom, and what message is revealed within it. When we accompany personal accounts, historical narratives and other forms of media with primary source evidence, we can be more confident in our understanding and conclusions. Students can expand their ability to infer when using primary source evidence by asking themselves what the source suggests without explicitly stating or showing. For example, reading a wartime diary written by a Holocaust survivor can be used alongside their wartime photographs to deepen our understanding of their real-time experiences. When we have multiple sources about the same historical topic, person or event to consider, our comparisons can bring validity to our conclusions or cause us to dig deeper if contradictions become apparent.

How do we measure progress?

The concept of **continuity and change** encourages students to gauge to what extent, and in what way, humanity has changed by comparing eras, subjects, situations or people. For example, when comparing the opening ceremonies of the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the 2024 Paris Olympics, significant change in societal norms, technology and representation is evident. Once a comparison of similarities and differences is complete, students can make reasoned judgments of progress and decline. Continuity can reveal stability in society and government while also highlighting injustice that remains unaddressed. And, of course, there are times when change represents progress for some and decline for others. Students can be empowered to include their own voice and ideas through this concept, as their judgments of decline or calls for change allows them to think of ways to make our world a better place.

¹ Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson, 2013), 24.

² Ibid.



How did we get here?

Cause and consequence can be used to structure our thinking about the result of a particular action, decision or event made by agents of the past. To investigate cause, we must seek knowledge of the individuals, groups and social dynamics involved in the action, decision or event. Who and what were the strongest influences? What else was going on in this time, place and situation? What were the *intended* consequences? To investigate consequence, we can identify to what extent the intended outcomes were achieved and which *unintended* consequences resulted from the action, decision or event. Sometimes, consequences can vary depending on who we are considering. Exploring this idea can further our understanding of underrepresented groups of people.

How can we better understand the people of the past?

Students can start to answer this key question by applying the concept of **historical perspectives**. For historians, “taking historical perspectives means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional settings that shaped people’s lives and actions in the past.”³ The goal is not for students to consider what they would have done and felt in the past, but to understand what someone in the past did and felt in relation to their own circumstances. By exploring a variety of experiences and perspectives, students can understand individual decisions, beliefs, values and motivations within a specific context.

How can history help us live in the present?

The **ethical dimensions** of history include our responsibilities to remember and respond to past events, and to make careful ethical judgments about historical actions in order to “learn something from the past that helps us to face the ethical issues of today.”⁴ While taking into account the historical context of the actors involved, we can make reasoned ethical judgments without imposing contemporary standards of right and wrong. Our understanding of history can help us make informed judgments about contemporary issues, but only when we recognize the limitations of any direct “lessons” from the past.

The content above has been adapted from Peter Seixas and Tom Morton’s book *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (2013) and www.historicalthinking.ca.

³ <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-perspectives>

⁴ <http://historicalthinking.ca/ethical-dimensions>



► HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPTS AND QUESTIONS FOR INQUIRY⁵

Below are some guiding questions that can be used to analyze any historical event. We can use these questions to support inquiry-based learning around the Holocaust.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

1. Is the event significant?
2. What makes it significant?
3. How significant is it?

PRIMARY SOURCE EVIDENCE

1. Where and when is the primary source from?
2. Who created the source?
3. What kind of source is it?
4. Who was it made for?
5. What impact did this source have on people at the time?
6. What can the source tell us about the person who created it?

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

1. How has society changed?
2. Why did society change?
3. Was change long-lasting?
4. Was change deep and significant?
5. How did society stay the same?
6. Why did it stay the same?

CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE

1. What caused the event to happen?
2. What are the consequences of the event?
3. What can we learn from the event?

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

1. How did people react at the time?
2. Were all reactions the same?
3. Why were there different reactions?
4. How did different reactions result in change?

ETHICAL DIMENSIONS

1. How do we remember and commemorate the event today?
2. How were moral views and beliefs at the time of the event different than those of today?
3. How does learning about this event better help us understand contemporary issues?

The following pages show how students can use our digital resource, Re:Collection, in conjunction with learning stations to apply historical thinking concepts.

⁵ The questions under Historical Significance, Cause and Consequence, Continuity and Change and Historical Perspectives were written by educator Ronald Martinello and taken from <https://historicalthinking.ca/blog/579>.



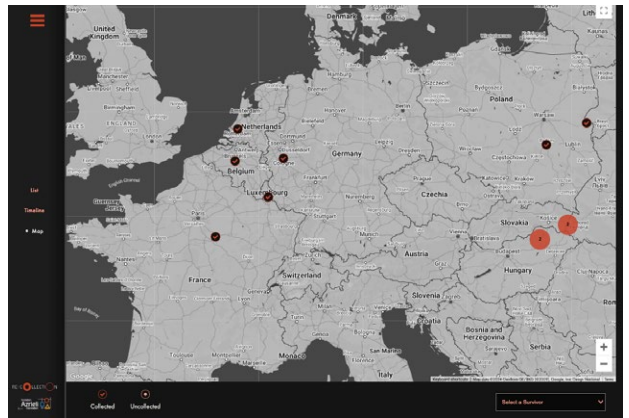
► RE:COLLECTION

Re:Collection is an educational tool for exploring the history of the Holocaust through first-hand accounts of survivors. This innovative digital resource combines video interviews with memoir excerpts, photos and artifacts, and features interactive timelines and maps to place survivors' stories in historical and geographic context.

Use Re:Collection in your classroom to help students understand the experiences of individual survivors and learn about important themes in the history of the Holocaust, allowing them to apply the historical thinking concepts.

There are no graphic images on Re:Collection, and the content is appropriate for all students mature enough to study the Holocaust.

To access Re:Collection, visit the Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program website (<https://memoirs.azrielifoundation.org/introduction-to-recollection/>)



The Warsaw Ghetto
After approximately 1.5 million ghettos existed by the Nazis to segregate and persecute Jews in Eastern Europe, the largest was located in the Polish city of Warsaw. In the fall of 1940, more than 400,000 Jews were eventually forced into the Warsaw ghetto, where they faced extreme overcrowding, violence, starvation and disease, and ultimately, deportation to the death camps being used in the most systematic and brutal instance during the Holocaust. Jewish ghettoes functioned as ghettos in 1940 and lasted for several weeks before being crushed by Nazi forces. This special collection features the experiences of several young Polish Jews who ended up in the Warsaw ghetto, detailing their efforts to survive the ghetto's harsh conditions and their perspectives on the war.

Auschwitz
One of the most notorious sites during the Holocaust was the complex of camps in Poland called Auschwitz, which included the death camp or killing center known as Birkenau. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, some Jews were subjected to forced or forced labor, and they were eventually sent to gas chambers. In 1943, camp conditions deteriorated to "death camps" for Czech Jews, and for several months were the only site to receive together with the victims, were selected for labor or sent to the gas chambers. Some Jews who survived the camp could be their fate. These deportations to the camp or camps were to the forced marches from Auschwitz to other camps. This special collection outlines the experiences that survivors of Auschwitz endured.

Anti-Jewish Laws
In Germany, the Nazi regime systematically got to place anti-Jewish laws to humiliate and isolate Jews and control their behavior status. The first steps in the Holocaust included stripping Jews of their citizenship, possessions, and rights and freedoms. As the Nazis extended their control in Europe, so too did they implement anti-Jewish laws to the countries they occupied, and debilitating laws added their own anti-Jewish laws and restrictions. One of the most critical laws of persecution was the requirement that Jews to be marked with a star, which was first established in Poland in 1939 and subsequently adopted throughout most of occupied Europe. This special collection reviews the ways that some survivors experienced discriminated persecution.

Hidden Children
More than one million Jewish children were murdered in the Holocaust, but some managed to survive. Many were sheltered by brave individuals, religious institutions or resistance groups who risked their lives to keep them safe. Children were left to themselves, posing as non-Jews with false identities or seeking refuge in forests. Some children hid with their families, while others were separated from their parents, some of whom did not survive the Holocaust. In the postwar period, former hidden children had to adjust to new realities including separation from their families, loss of families and recognition of their Jewish identities. The stories of children who survived in hiding are featured in the collection below.

1935

MARCH 10, 1933
Hitler announces the boycott against the Jewish community in the Reich of Germany's Jewish citizens, and other general boycotts throughout the Reich. While the international community largely ignored the boycotts, the boycotts were organized by the League of Nations as a means to support Germany's aims as a major European power, it was largely ignored by a supportive German public, enthusiastic for the potential for more jobs and status on the world stage. The boycott of Germany is now officially under way.

MAY 21, 1935
The Nazi government passes the Disenfranchisement Law, which bans "non-Aryans" from military service and forbids German military personnel from marrying "non-Aryans." This act is a significant step in degrading civil rights according to Nazi concepts of race.

SEPTEMBER 15, 1935
The Nazi government passes the Nuremberg Laws, two pieces of legislation legalizing anti-Semitism and the separation of Jews from the broader German community. These anti-Jewish laws are followed by the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police. The first law, the Reich Citizenship Law, strips German citizenship from Jewish Germans. This law also defines citizenship and qualifications of Jewish persons based on the number of their grandmothers who are Jewish. The larger criteria of citizenship laws are also subjected to the second law, the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor, which prevents Jews from having sexual relationships with or marrying "Aryans." By 1938, the Nazi government will have passed more than 1,400 anti-Jewish laws.



► RE:COLLECTION INSTRUCTIONS

RE · C O L L E C T I O N

Exploring the history of the Holocaust through
first-hand accounts of survivors

On Re:Collection, you will find:

- Video interviews
- Memoir excerpts
- Photos
- Artifacts



ACCESS

[Re:Collection](#)



EXPLORE

Re:Collection

BY SURVIVOR

- On the menu, select "Survivors"
- Select the name of a survivor
- Click on a circle on the page to launch a recollection

BY THEME

- On the menu, select "Themes"
- Select a theme
- Click on a circle on the page to launch a recollection



TIP

- The **[i]** icon gives you access to further information (biography, glossary, etc.)
- The "My Collection" tab lets you register to collect recollections and view a personalized map and timeline.



VIDEO

HOW TO USE

[Re:Collection](#)





► LEARNING STATIONS

You can create learning stations for each historical thinking concept to support students. We have provided two examples for you on the next two pages. Below is a guide to the headings in each learning station example.

Relevant Themes

We have suggested some themes from Re:Collection that would be a good fit for the selected historical thinking concept.

Guiding Questions for Students

These questions are taken directly or slightly adapted from the Questions for Inquiry. You can print them on laminated cards as discussion prompts at each learning station or provide a worksheet with the questions so students can write down their responses. See the Appendix for samples.

Supplementary Resources

We partner with credible and reputable organizations and encourage the use of their historical and educational resources to supplement the learning beyond what is available in our collection. These institutions include Montreal Holocaust Museum, Toronto Holocaust Museum, Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre and Facing History & Ourselves.



► **LEARNING STATION EXAMPLE 1**

HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPT: CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE



Relevant Themes

- [Family](#)
- [Pre-War Daily Life](#)
- [Politics & War](#)
- [Discrimination & Persecution](#)
- [Immigration](#)
- [Aftermath](#)



Activity

- Have students explore some or all of the themes above in conjunction with the [Historical Timeline](#) to gather a sense of global events and the impact of these events on individual stories.
- Students can “collect” items of interest and view them within the timeline, alongside the global context.



Guiding Questions for Students

1. What caused or allowed the Holocaust to happen?
(What were the key decisions, events or conditions?)
2. What were the consequences of the Holocaust?
(Who was impacted? How were they impacted? What was the magnitude of the impact?)
3. What followed or resulted from the Holocaust?
(What changed in society after the war? What new laws or policies came into effect?)



Supplementary Resources

- For historical context prior to 1933: [Timeline - Nazi Path to Power](#).
- For postwar events such as changes to immigration policy, [Short Film – Seeking Refuge](#); for the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials, [Timeline - War Crimes Trials](#).



► **LEARNING STATION EXAMPLE 2**

HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPT: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES



Relevant Themes

- [Discrimination & Persecution](#)
- [Resistance](#)
- [Hiding](#)
- [Escape](#)
- [Rescuers & The Righteous](#)



Activity

- Explore some or all themes above to discover the wide variety of reactions and responses to the Holocaust through first-hand accounts.
- While exploring, listen to the survivor's personal experience and note the various people and perspectives they mention.



Guiding Questions for Students

1. How did people react to the Holocaust at the time?
2. Were all reactions the same?
3. Why were there different reactions to the Holocaust?
4. Did different reactions result in change? If so, how? If not, why?



Supplementary Resources

- [Montreal Holocaust Museum Timeline - Empty Acts: The World Responds](#)
- [Montreal Holocaust Museum Timeline - Fighting to Survive: Jewish Resistance](#)
- [Montreal Holocaust Museum Timeline - The World Responds: Too Little Too Late](#)
- [USHMM - Collaboration](#)
- [Facing History: The Range of Responses](#)



▶ APPENDIX

Sample Lamination Card

Historical Perspectives

How can we better understand people of the past?

Take time to explore these themes on Re:Collection and then discuss the questions below. Include specific examples in your response.

- Family
- Politics & War
- Immigration
- Pre-War Daily Life
- Discrimination & Persecution
- Aftermath

How did people react to the Holocaust at the time?

Were all reactions the same?

Why were there different reactions?

Did different reactions result in change? If so, how? if not, why?

Sample Worksheet

Historical Perspectives

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Did different reactions result in change? If not, why?
