



The First Step

A Guide for Educators Preparing to Teach
about the Holocaust

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This guide was developed based on our many years of working with teachers and Holocaust survivors. The Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program was established by the Azrieli Foundation in 2005 to collect, preserve and share the memoirs and diaries written by survivors of the Holocaust who came to Canada. These memoirs – published in both English and French – are distributed free of charge to educational institutions across Canada. A variety of bilingual educational materials are available to support teachers who are using the memoirs in their classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

What this Guide Can Do for You

The First Step prepares teachers to begin a unit of study on the Holocaust.

Experienced teachers of the Holocaust will find it is a chance to review and reflect on past approaches. Teachers who are new to teaching the Holocaust will be introduced to crucial foundational concepts and approaches. The First Step is intended for educators who teach students age twelve and older in all subjects.

This guide is an important starting point for all teachers, including those coming to this topic from subjects outside of history and social studies, such as English, French or visual arts.

Here is a summary of what you'll cover:

- Core content
- Teaching goals
- Methodology

We know that the Holocaust can be difficult to teach and that educational approaches to this topic have changed over time. In our recent [survey](#) of Canadian teachers, the majority of respondents indicated that they do not feel very confident teaching the Holocaust – **this guide gives you the tools you need to build that confidence.**



Before beginning, let's check in with a self-assessment.

On the scale below, rate how confident you feel about your readiness to teach about the Holocaust right now.



By the end of this guide, you will be able to confidently answer these three questions:

What was the Holocaust?

Why do I want my students to learn about the Holocaust?

How do I safely, respectfully and successfully teach my students about the Holocaust?



QUESTION 1

What Was the Holocaust?

Understanding the Core Content

The first task in preparing to teach about the Holocaust in your classroom is to clarify and expand your understanding of the complex set of historical events known as the Holocaust.

There is no one singular definition of the Holocaust, which is also known by the Hebrew word Shoah.

Take a few minutes to brainstorm key phrases and concepts that you would include in your definition of the Holocaust.

Try to address these criteria:

- *Nazi ideology*
- *the victims of the Nazis*
- *when and where these events occurred*
- *the links between the Holocaust and World War II*



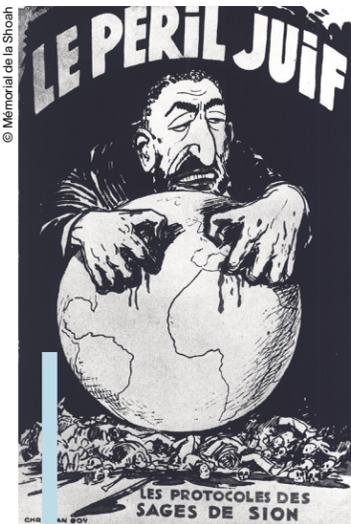
Pause and reflect on your brainstorm notes. Did you recognize any gaps in your knowledge about the Holocaust?

In our survey of Canadian teachers, the majority of respondents indicated that most of their knowledge about the Holocaust comes from Google and YouTube.

You do not need to be an expert in the Holocaust to teach it to students, but you do need a solid grasp of the main context, ideas and events – the core content – learned from reputable sources.

Take some time to explore the core content graphic on the next page. And as you explore, keep in mind these two important factors:

- The different and sometimes fluid categories of people involved in the Holocaust and their **motivations, perspectives** and **roles**: These categories include perpetrators (Nazis and their collaborators and enablers), bystanders and witnesses, beneficiaries, resisters and rescuers, and victims and survivors.
- The diverse **contexts** for victims and survivors: Although all Jews were targeted by the Nazis, the forms and timing of attacks on Jews varied in different countries, resulting in different survival rates and experiences for Jews across Europe and beyond.

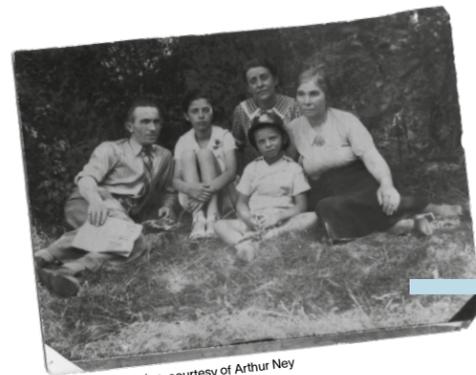


IDEAS AND DEVELOPMENTS THAT PRECEDED THE HOLOCAUST

- The long history of anti-Jewish attitudes
- The forms of anti-Jewish persecution in Europe and elsewhere
- The development of imperialism, nationalism, racism and eugenics
- The social and political effects of World War I

THE AFTERMATH OF THE HOLOCAUST

- Trauma and rebuilding for survivors
- Displaced persons camps
- The struggle to emigrate
- Efforts at attaining justice, such as the Nuremberg Trials
- The concept of genocide and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights



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JEWISH LIFE

- The history of Jews in Europe
- The diverse Jewish communities and their range of cultural and religious practices before the Holocaust

The Holocaust

The Holocaust refers to Nazi Germany's attempt to annihilate the Jewish population of Europe. Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Party, saw Jews as the primary enemy of the "Aryan" race and believed that Germany would become powerful only by ridding itself of Jews.

Starting in 1933, Nazi Germany took measures to humiliate, isolate and persecute Jews.

The Nazis also targeted other groups in Germany, including Roma and Sinti, people with disabilities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Afro-Germans, homosexuals and political opponents.

With the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, Nazi policies and violence extended to each country occupied by Germany. During the war, the Nazis and their collaborators began systematically killing Jews and other target groups.

By the time World War II ended in 1945, six million Jews had been murdered in the Holocaust.

THE UNFOLDING OF THE HOLOCAUST DURING WORLD WAR II

- The expansion of Germany across Europe and its system of alliances that brought the Jewish population under Nazi control
- The spread of systematic methods of anti-Jewish persecution, such as the ghettos in Eastern Europe
- The evolution of persecution and violence into mass killing operations, such as Einsatzgruppen shootings starting in 1941
- The development of the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" in mid-1941, the Nazi leadership's plan to murder all Jews
- The creation of killing centres in occupied Poland using gas to murder Jews
- The deportation of Jews from all over Europe to Nazi camps and killing centres
- The forced death marches of camp prisoners in the final months of the war



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NAZISM

- The core tenets of Nazi ideology
- The central role of antisemitism
- The political process by which Hitler came to power in 1933



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KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PRE-WAR NAZI YEARS

- The social and political revolution in Germany
- The intensifying persecution of Jews and other target groups
- The opening of concentration camps for Nazi target groups beginning in 1933
- The Nuremberg Laws of 1935
- The Kristallnacht pogrom in 1938
- The Jewish refugee crisis and the voyage of the *MS St. Louis* in 1939
- The beginning of the program to murder Germans with disabilities in 1939

QUESTION 2

Why Do I Want My Students to Learn about the Holocaust?

Creating a Rationale Statement

Now that you've expanded your understanding of the Holocaust, consider why you want to teach this topic by developing a rationale statement that sets out your learning goals for students.

To get you thinking, here is an example of a rationale statement developed by the Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program for a unit of study on rescue during the Holocaust:

Our rationale statement sets out two learning goals for students.

- Students will learn *about* the Holocaust, in particular the theme of Holocaust rescue. They will gain a comprehensive understanding of what the Holocaust was, where and when it took place, who was involved, and why and how it unfolded as it did. By engaging with survivor memoirs, students will come to a deep understanding of the dynamics of Holocaust rescue, including the challenges faced by the small minority of people who helped Jews in Nazi Europe.
- Students will be guided to learn *from* the Holocaust by analyzing the forces that shape human behaviour in times of crisis and reflecting on the significance of first-person testimonies. By studying accounts of Holocaust rescue set in the extreme circumstances of Nazi Europe, students will draw insights about human behaviour that will help them apply their learning to become responsible global citizens. Furthermore, as students consider the past through the perspective of people who lived through significant events, they will reflect on the value of first-person testimonies in remembering and responding to past events.



These are some elements to consider when crafting your rationale statement for a unit of study on the Holocaust. Your rationale statement should:

1. Balance the goals of learning about the Holocaust and learning from the Holocaust.

Students need to learn about what happened before making meaning from it; likewise, learning about this difficult history may seem pointless to students unless they can see its relevance to the modern world.

2. Avoid prioritizing an emotional response.

Emotions can play a role in learning, but demonstrating a strong emotional reaction doesn't mean that a student has engaged thoughtfully with the material. You should seek to create the lasting learning that comes from an understanding of the context in which the Holocaust took place and how we can draw insights from this history.

QUESTION 3

How Do I Safely, Respectfully and Successfully Teach My Students about the Holocaust?

Selecting Content and Establishing a Methodology

Now that you've developed a rationale statement for teaching the Holocaust, the last step is to consider how you will bring this topic into the classroom.

How will you select content and methods to help your students learn the material you want to teach and reach the learning goals you've set?

As you work to create learning experiences that are safe (avoid harm to students), respectful (of this history and the memory of the victims) and successful (achieve learning outcomes), consider the important advice in this list of Do's and Don'ts developed over many years by other educators, some of which are discussed in more detail below.

Much of this guidance is adapted from educational materials created by the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#).

DON'T

Don't use simulations or games that ask students to 'play' perpetrators, victims or bystanders

Don't make simple comparisons between groups targeted by the Nazis or rank the suffering of one group over another

Don't use graphic images for the purpose of shocking your students

Don't compare genocides unless each case has been studied thoroughly on its own

Don't use movies or novels as the sole material for a Holocaust unit

Don't legitimize distortion and denial of the past by engaging with false theories and debates

DO

Do clearly define the Holocaust and be precise in the terms you use

Do use survivor testimony to translate statistics into individual stories

Do include material that represents the Jews of Europe beyond the period of the Holocaust, as people with a rich culture and history

Do provide time for students to process what they are learning and ask questions

Do discuss the complexity of history and avoid simple answers to complex questions

Do teach students to critically evaluate internet sources



For more guidance, check out the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's resource: Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust.](#)

No matter the age of your students and your class subject, all teaching about the Holocaust should begin by defining what you will be studying together.

This means that you will need to translate some of the core content you explored earlier for your students. A starting point can be to ask your students what they know and what questions they have, and you can build out from there. You may choose to spend less time on certain elements of the core content, depending on the age of students or specific topics/themes that you will explore in depth.

[Using survivor testimony is an engaging and effective pedagogical strategy in Holocaust education.](#)

Incorporating survivor testimony – either written memoirs or oral histories – into your lessons connects students to an individual who lived through this history. Survivor testimony shows Jewish responses to the unfolding genocide, which restores their agency. When students learn a survivor's life story, including their recollections about pre-war life, they recognize the diversity and richness of Jewish life in Europe before it was destroyed by the Holocaust – an element of Holocaust education that is often neglected. And when students learn about survivors' postwar struggles, they become aware of the continuing effects of the Holocaust on people's lives and families.



Read our [Educational Philosophy](#) to learn more about the value of using Canadian survivor testimony in your classroom.

[Acknowledge that some of your students may find studying the Holocaust to be emotionally difficult.](#)

The Holocaust is a sensitive subject to learn about, and some of your students may struggle. Build in opportunities for students to process the material and share their reflections with you and in small group activities. Choose materials carefully with the age and sensitivity of your students in mind.

APPENDIX

Historical Thinking Concepts

Historical thinking concepts help students answer two key questions linked to studying the Holocaust:

1. 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.”¹ 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.

[See here](#) for more information on historical perspectives.

2. How can history help us live in the present?

The concept of ethical dimensions provides a way of thinking through this second key question. **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.”² 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.

[See here](#) for more information on ethical dimensions.

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.

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

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