The First Step

A Guide for Educators Preparing to Teach about the Holocaust

Fondation Azrieli Foundation

Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program
Programme des mémoires de survivants de l'Holocauste

memoirs.azrielifoundation.org

THE FIRST STEP

A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS PREPARING TO TEACH ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

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*

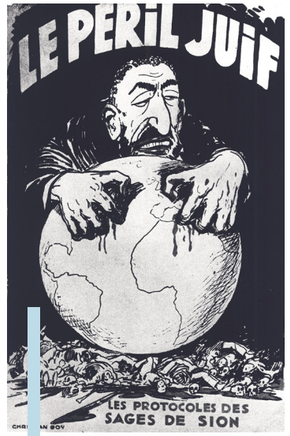
Pause and reflect on your brainstorm notes. Did you recognize any gaps in your knowledge about the Holocaust?

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.



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IDEAS AND DEVELOPMENTS THAT PRECEDED THE HOLOCAUST

- The ancient roots of anti-Jewish attitudes, dating back to the early Christian period
- The evolving forms of anti-Jewish persecution in the following centuries
- The development of imperialism, nationalism, racism and eugenics
- The social and political effects of World War I

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JEWISH LIFE

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

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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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.

1933

1939

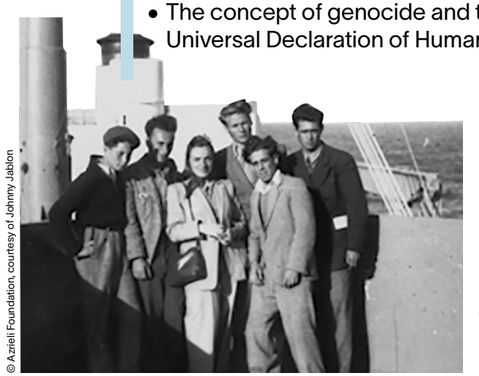
1945

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

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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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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To see other definitions and learn more about the core content, we recommend these classroom-friendly resources:

- The Montreal Holocaust Museum's interactive online History of the Holocaust.
- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Introduction to the Holocaust text, searchable Holocaust Encyclopedia and overview video The Path to Nazi Genocide.
- Yad Vashem's multi-part video What is the Holocaust? and short videos of scholars answering common questions about the Holocaust.

If you're interested in reading an accessible, comprehensive history of the Holocaust, see Doris L. Bergen's book *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (2016).

Now that you have explored the core content, you are ready to create a working definition of the Holocaust. Since you will begin your unit of study by defining the topic with your students, think of this task as the foundation. Feel free to come back to it to make changes as you plan your unit.

Use the lines below to begin writing your working definition of the Holocaust to use in your classroom. You can also refer to the definition of the Holocaust we provide as part of the core content graphic to get you started.

Remember 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***

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.

3. Guide students to make meaning from the Holocaust, rather than drawing direct lessons from the Holocaust.
Studying historical events does not offer us a blueprint for how to behave in the present, and making the connections between the Holocaust and students' present-day actions too explicit reduces the complexity of the past. For example, the Holocaust was not an extreme case of bullying, so it isn't useful to compare bystander behaviour during the Holocaust to situations students face in the schoolyard. Help students recognize the historical specificity of what they are learning: the decisions made by people during the Holocaust, as well as the suffering and responses of the victims, occurred in a particular time and place. Engaging with this history in a responsible way means drawing on historical thinking concepts, such as historical perspective and ethical judgment.

For those of you who aren't history or social studies teachers, see the Appendix for a summary of these concepts and links to learn more.

Now that you've seen an example and considered the three important elements, use this space to develop your own working rationale statement:

If you are working through this guide with a teaching partner or team member, share your rationale statements with each other. In what ways are they similar and different? Is there anything you would add or change after seeing theirs?

Return to your rationale statement as you develop your methodology and start your classroom lessons so that you can make sure they are aligned with your teaching goals. Consider sharing the rationale statement with your students so they understand the purpose of this difficult learning.

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.

Take a moment to list resources in and out of school that you and your students can go to for support.

- Resource librarian for texts
- School counsellor for emotional support and processing
- Administration for parental concern about content
- The Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program for educational materials created for students
-
-
-
-

CONCLUSION
What Comes Next

Let's return to the self-assessment you made at the start to see if your rating has changed after completing this guide.
On the scale below, rate how confident you feel about your readiness to teach about the Holocaust in your classroom.

We hope that you feel better prepared to delve into a challenging but important unit of study with your students!

Use this space to write down any questions you still have or areas you'd like to explore further, or use it to begin planning your unit.

This was your first step; what's your next step?

The Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program offers a variety of Educational Materials that can easily be adapted to meet the needs of your classroom. You can choose between our **Education Programs**, multi-lesson units offering a complete program of study on a theme related to the Holocaust, or our shorter **Activities**, which are based on a specific survivor story or theme. You can also use our digital resource, Re:Collection, which is an educational tool for exploring the history of the Holocaust through first-hand accounts of survivors.

Visit our website and download our Educators' Catalogue to learn about all of our free, bilingual resources. Reach out to ask us questions and let us know how we can support you.

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