

LESSON: History of Antisemitism and the Holocaust

GRADE LEVEL: Adaptable for grades 7–12

SUBJECT: Multidisciplinary

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 60–75 minutes (extensions available)

This foundational lesson introduces key concepts and information to students.

RATIONALE

One of the factors leading to the Holocaust was a long history of antisemitism in Germany, Europe, and the world. The Nazi-led government built on existing beliefs and prejudices in creating a racial ideology that resulted in the persecution and murder of Jews in Europe. Antisemitism alone did not lead to the Holocaust, but it was a necessary precursor, contributing to an environment where prejudice, hate speech, and violence could occur.

This lesson will focus on the history of antisemitism and its role in the Holocaust to better understand how prejudice and hate speech can contribute to violence, mass atrocity, and genocide. Learning about the origins of hatred and prejudice encourages students to think critically about antisemitism today.

A review of key definitions distinguishing fact, opinion, and belief is included when analyzing historical events.

NOTE: This lesson is not intended as a crisis response to antisemitic acts on campuses but rather an approach to understanding the historical origins of antisemitism.

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What are the origins and history of antisemitism?
- How has antisemitism evolved?
- How was racial antisemitism in Nazi Germany different from the religious antisemitism of the past?
- How did antisemitism permeate German society legally and socially, and what was its impact on the Jewish community?
- How do you recognize antisemitism today?
- When your community has encountered antisemitism, what measures have people taken in response?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students understand:

- The difference between fact, opinion, and belief
- The origins and history of antisemitism
- Ways that antisemitism has changed over time

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- The dangers of prejudice and hate speech
- Recognize examples of antisemitism today, and how people have chosen to act in response

TEACHER PREPARATION

- Share [KWL chart](#)
- Preview [European Antisemitism from its Origins to the Present](#) film (13:44) and print [transcripts](#), if necessary
- Preview *Holocaust Encyclopedia* article “[Antisemitism](#),”
- Preview chapter 3 of [The Path to Nazi Genocide](#) (7:28)
- Preview testimony clips: [Ruth Rack](#) (1:23) and [Hannah Altbush](#) (1:21)
- If new to teaching the Holocaust, review the USHMM’s [Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust](#) or watch a [teacher training video](#)

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

The lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve educational outcomes. Technology and teaching strategies are suggested in the instructional sequence; please use other options if they support the learning needs of your students. Consider utilizing graphic organizers, note-taking strategies, reading choices, and online engagement tools.

Educators may choose to use learner variability modifications specific to this lesson:

- Provide students with options as to how they access information throughout lessons, i.e., read print alone, read print with a partner, read along while the teacher reads aloud, etc.
- Define terms that would clarify understanding for students.
- Use online discussion or engagement tools that work best in your classroom.
- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* articles are available in various languages; refer to the word “Language” and select the Globe icon available on the lefthand side of the article.
- *The Path to Nazi Genocide* is subtitled in 12 languages. Scroll below the video to see the options.
- Incorporate activities such as think-pair-share and jigsaw to enhance student engagement.

This lesson is available as an [online, asynchronous experience for students](#), which can be accessed through a web browser or LMS files. The online lessons are accessible to all students for in-person and virtual learning, and they provide specific support for students using screen readers.

PART ONE: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ANTISEMITISM

1. Ask students the differences between fact, opinion, and belief. Write responses on the board, menti, or padlet. Are there similarities to the responses?
2. Next, provide definitions:

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DEFINITIONS

- A **fact** is verifiable. We can determine whether it is true by researching the evidence. How do you know this? Does it always mean the same thing? What are the multiple possible meanings?
- An **opinion** is a judgment based on facts, an honest attempt to draw a reasonable conclusion from factual evidence.
- Unlike an opinion, a **belief** is a conviction based on cultural or personal faith, morality, or values

3. How do the definitions compare with the original class brainstorming about fact, opinion, and belief?
4. Tell students that they will research and learn about antisemitism. As a class, in groups or individually, complete the [KWL chart](#) for the term *antisemitism*.
5. Next, provide students with a definition of antisemitism for their charts:

The word **antisemitism** means prejudice against or hatred of Jews.

6. Distribute the [film transcript](#) to students before watching the 13-minute film [European Antisemitism from its Origins to the Present](#). Ask them to annotate the transcript while watching the film. Ask students to especially underline/highlight areas:

- that illustrate the origins and evolution of antisemitism
- where they see the distortion of facts impacting opinions and beliefs

7. Debrief with the class about what they learned from the film.
8. Project or distribute the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* article "[Antisemitism](#)" for the class to reference during the film debrief, OR working in groups, pairs, or individually students can read the articles after the film and before the discussion.
9. List responses to the following discussion questions.

- What are the historical origins of antisemitism?
- How has antisemitism changed throughout history?
- How has misinformation been used to justify antisemitic beliefs?

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- When have political or religious leaders espoused antisemitic ideas? What was the purpose?

10. Students continue to populate their KWL charts during and after the discussion.

Review the concept of antisemitism and remind students of the difference between fact, opinion, and belief. During the next lesson, they will learn how and why Nazi Germany gradually isolated, segregated, impoverished, and incarcerated Jews starting in 1933.

PART TWO: ANTISEMITISM AND THE HOLOCAUST

1. To illustrate the racial nature of Nazi antisemitism, show students [Chapter 3 of *The Path to Nazi Genocide: From Citizens to Outcasts*](#) (7:28). Provide a copy of the transcript for students to annotate as they watch and share prompts that will frame discussion after viewing:

- How and why did Nazi Germany gradually isolate, segregate, impoverish, and incarcerate Jews between 1933 and 1939?
- How did antisemitism permeate German society legally and socially, and what was its impact on the Jewish community?

2. After viewing, discuss and list student responses on the board or online. Students could populate answers for a comprehensive list and provide high engagement from each student. Responses should include:

- Examples of the legal measures the Nazi-led German government used to gradually exclude Jews from public life, professions, and public education.
- Ways that Nazis demonized Jews and created a climate of hostility and indifference toward their plight

3. Display the following questions, and watch the two clips.
 - a. How did the antisemitism permeating German society legally and socially impact Ruth Rack and Hannah Altbush, members of the Jewish Community?
 - b. What do these two testimonies illustrate about the possibility for individual choices and actions during the Holocaust?

- [Ruth Rack](#): Friends joined mob after Kristallnacht (1:23)
- [Hannah Altbush](#): Solidarity of classmates (1:21)

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PART THREE: ANTISEMITISM TODAY

1. Ask: Do you know of any examples of antisemitism today? Record answers with an online engagement tool.
 - a. In your local community?
 - b. State community?
 - c. In the United States?
 - d. On a website or social media?
 - e. You can also share examples from USHMM:
 - i. [Museum Condemns Pittsburgh Synagogue Attack](#)
 - ii. [Letters from Holocaust Survivors to Pittsburgh Jewish Community](#)
 - iii. [Museum Statement on Texas Hostage Taking](#)
2. Choose an example. **Where do you see fact, opinion, and belief intersect?** How does understanding the difference between fact, opinion, and belief counter prejudice and antisemitism?
3. Ask students to identify ways that people or groups in their communities have responded to antisemitism. How effective do they find these responses? What responses would they recommend?

CONCLUSION

ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

- Students revisit their KWL charts to complete the “learn” column citing textual evidence from the resources presented in the lesson.
- Using the charts, students construct their own ARE (assertion, reasoning, and verifiable evidence) on antisemitism. The ARE, along with the KWL chart, can be used to write a summary paragraph or guide the research and writing of a research paper.
- Students select current events or memes related to antisemitism to analyze in pairs. Use the ARE framework to discern between facts, opinions, and beliefs: What is being asserted? What is the reason for this assertion? Can you find three pieces of evidence to support the assertion?
- Develop your assertion about the meme's message and how it might be countered. What questions does it generate?
- Ask students to [reflect on this letter written by Holocaust survivors](#) to Pittsburgh Jewish Community.
- Writing prompt: consider the quotation below. What do you think it means?

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“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out-- Because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out-- Because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out-- Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me-- and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Martin Niemöller (1892-1984)

When finished, ask students to read the [Holocaust Encyclopedia article](#) discussing the quote. Revisit your original answer. Would you adjust it? Why or why not?

EXTENSION OPTIONS

- 1. Listen to [this podcast](#). Construct before/after identity charts for Frank Meeink.
- 2. Listen to [Mark Potok](#) discuss the devastating effect that propaganda from small hate groups continues to have in America. How do social conditions encourage and allow lies to spread? How does that relate to belief, opinion, and fact?
- 3. Divide students into six groups. Each group will research a different type of antisemitism and report back to the class:
 - [Antisemitism in History: From the Early Church to 1400](#)
 - [Antisemitism in History: The Early Modern Era, 1300-1800](#)
 - [Antisemitism in History: The Era of Nationalism, 1800-1918](#)
 - [Antisemitism in History: Racial Antisemitism, 1875-1945](#)
 - [Antisemitism in History: World War I](#)
 - [Antisemitism in History: Nazi Antisemitism](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Teaching Materials on Antisemitism and Racism](#)
- [Teaching Materials on Propaganda](#)