

LESSON: Holocaust Narrative through Historical Photos

GRADE LEVEL: Adaptable for grades 7–12

SUBJECT: Multidisciplinary

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

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

RATIONALE

Identifying what students know about how and why the Holocaust happened before beginning a study of the Holocaust can be challenging. This lesson provides a method of assessing what students know and how they think about the Holocaust. Through interacting with a range of historical photographs and images, students generate questions that can then lead to more productive lesson planning.

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What was the Holocaust?
- How was the Holocaust the culmination of multiple factors?
- How did the Holocaust continue to impact the world after World War II ended?

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students understand:

- The definition of the Holocaust
- The Holocaust was a process that happened over time and involved many people
- The Holocaust was the result of longstanding antisemitism and racism
- The Holocaust happened in the context of World War II
- The Holocaust occurred over a large geographic area
- The Holocaust impacted life after World War II ended

TEACHER PREPARATION

- If new to teaching the Holocaust, review the USHMM's [Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust](#)
- Familiarize yourself with the [photographs](#) and [themes](#) represented
- Print and prepare folders of the photos (one full packet of all 36 images for each small group of students) and copies of the [Exit Ticket Worksheet](#) worksheet.
- Prepare chart paper and tape for students to display the photos they choose.

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.**

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MODIFICATIONS FOR ONLINE INSTRUCTION

- Students can work with the photos in groups in online breakout rooms
- Share the photos as slides that students can rearrange
- Have the students share the photos their groups chose on a digital poster board.
- Provide an appropriate forum for online discussion.

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS

- Pre-teaching of lesson-specific vocabulary.

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

Before beginning this lesson, consider the following:

- What do you assume students already know about World War II and the Holocaust?
- In what ways have students likely been exposed to the Holocaust? Might they have studied it in an earlier grade, a different content area class, or through culture and media?
- What are some common misconceptions, simple narratives, and myths related to the Holocaust?
- How will the student feedback provided by this lesson inform your lesson planning?

PRE-ASSESSMENT

1. Explain to students that they will be beginning a study of the Holocaust.

ASK THE STUDENTS

- Who has heard of the Holocaust?
- Have you studied it in another grade or course or heard it referenced outside of school?
- Are there any people, places, or dates that immediately come to mind?

2. Note on the board or chart paper the names, places, or dates that students share.

THE ACTIVITY

1. Divide the students into small groups.

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2. Each group should have one packet of all the [photos](#) in a folder or envelope (or digital access) as well as poster paper to display the photos they choose (if using this approach). Ask the students to not look through the photos until you have given the complete directions.

TELL THE STUDENTS

- The Holocaust was a complex historical event that encompassed a wide geographic area, and involved many people. Today, we're going to explore what you know and understand about the Holocaust. Don't worry if you feel like others have more knowledge; this is a collaborative exercise in which we can all learn something new.
- In your group's folder (or envelope) are images of people, places, and objects that cover many years, but most are from the time period of the Holocaust.
- Each group will select six (6) images that you feel best represent your understanding of the Holocaust and could use to give a basic explanation of the Holocaust to someone who was unfamiliar with the history based on those images. Each group will produce a unique product.
- This is not meant to be frustrating, though your group will have to make some difficult choices and critically analyze why you selected particular images.
- There are no "correct" or "incorrect" choices here; there is no "gotcha" where I will show you which 6 you should have selected. This is designed to see what you know, what kinds of questions you have, and how I can better select resources.

3. Students should have 20 - 30 minutes to look through the photos, discuss the photos and decide which they will use. While students are engaged in this process, the teacher should circulate, listening in on the conversations with an ear towards:

- Are particular images raising many questions?
- Are the students making connections to contemporary issues? If so, how?
- How are the students using analytical criteria in their discussion?
 - What reasoning or logic is guiding their selection?
 - What level of background knowledge is evident?
 - Are any myths or misconceptions influencing selection?
 - How is the accompanying text influencing the choice of images?
- Are the groups focusing on choosing:
 - Chronologically?
 - Thematically?
 - Pictures of individuals, groups, or objects?
 - Static or active pictures?
- What image or type of images appear to be discounted as having little value?

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4. After students have made their final choices, the images should be presented (either on chart paper or digitally) so that all students can view them. Options for debriefing include:

- If room allows, students stand back and look at the different posters that have been created. Each group can talk through how they would use their poster to explain how and why the Holocaust occurred.
- Students can do a gallery walk, where they note commonalities, differences, and perceived narratives.
- The teacher may lead a class discussion, asking groups to share their decision making processes and inquiring which images were the most striking as well as what surprised them and/or which images raised questions? What went into choosing a particular photo or set of photos?
- Discussing which images were chosen the most often and why.

5. When the debrief is finished, the teacher shares the USHMM definition of the Holocaust, displaying on a screen or sharing out electronically:

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, people with disabilities**, some of the **Slavic peoples** (Poles, Russians, and others), and **Black people**. Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them **Communists, Socialists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, men who were accused of “homosexuality,”** and people whom the regime identified as **“asocials”** and **“professional criminals.”**

6. Allow some time for students to unpack the definition, either in small groups or as a class discussion. Some of the specific terms (highlighted in orange) may need to be specifically explained.

7. Ask the students to regroup.

In their groups, have them discuss:

- What parts of the definition did the selected photos in your group represent?
- What aspects of the definition were not addressed?
- Identify at least one image you would add or change.
 - Why would you make that change?

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- How does this change help you to better illustrate the definition of the Holocaust?

7. If time allows use the following questions for a deeper discussion:

- Much of the Holocaust occurred under the cover of World War II, which began in 1939. What do the images taken before 1939 show us about the factors, conditions, and decisions that led to the Nazi mass murder of Jews?
 - The Holocaust was a process that happened over time and involved many people
 - The Holocaust was the result of longstanding antisemitism and racism
- Some of these photos were taken after the Holocaust ended in 1945. Why do you think they are included here, and what do they show about the impact of the Holocaust?
 - The Holocaust continued to impact the lives of many after World War II ended
- How do the images and informational text reinforce the ‘systematic, state-sponsored’ nature of the Holocaust?
- Very few of the images feature Hitler or Nazi officials. Who do you see in the photographs participating in the Holocaust, and what does this tell you about the type and number of people who might have been involved in these crimes?
 - Many ordinary citizens played a role in the in the Holocaust in varying degrees
- The majority of the images have both location and dates on them. What can you tell about the Holocaust based on the time periods represented and the geography covered?
 - The Holocaust happened in the context of World War II
 - The Holocaust occurred over a large geographic area

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CONCLUSION

ASSESSMENT

Student understandings and questions can be assessed by using this exit ticket strategy. You can refer to the [Exit Ticket Worksheet](#) as an assessment. The exit ticket asks students the following questions:

- What is something that you thought you knew about the Holocaust that was challenged?
- Identify two new things you learned about the Holocaust from working with the pictures.
- What is one question that you hope is answered in our study of the Holocaust?

EXTENSIONS

The assessment above is one way to work with the photos included here. Other suggestions are:

- Have students each choose one or two photos and then research the [theme](#) associated with that photo or photos on the Holocaust Encyclopedia. After they have read the article, students should summarize in three or four sentences. Have the students then place their summaries in a collaborative document to present a history of the Holocaust.
- To use this lesson as a summative assessment, have the students:
 - Choose the 6 - 8 photos that best represent or define the Holocaust.
 - Explain their criteria, or annotate the photos and text, for why each of the photos are essential to define the Holocaust
- Use the photos as a starting point for researching on collections.ushmm.org, where students can research in more depth topics of interest.
- Return to the photos as an opportunity to work with [photo analysis](#).

FOR A SHORTER AMOUNT OF TIME

If you have a shorter class period or prefer a lower stakes assessment, a similar activity can be done in the following fashion:

- Have the students break into small groups.
- Instead of having students choose 6 images, posting them, and explaining their choices, they can work in their groups and:
 - Select up to ten images which they feel are most important in explaining the Holocaust, annotating the picture and/or the text and identify what caught their attention or why this might be important.
 - Select up to five images which raise questions or they feel aren't essential for understanding the Holocaust and annotate the text and/or picture, identifying the questions it raises or why it did not meet their criteria.

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- You can then collect the images and read over the annotations and identify where students appear to have knowledge and what areas need further development.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Holocaust Encyclopedia article [Introduction to the Holocaust](#)
- Holocaust Encyclopedia article [Overview of the Holocaust: Topics to Teach](#)
- If unfamiliar with the fundamental history of antisemitism and the Holocaust, view the USHMM films:
 - [The Path to Nazi Genocide](#)
 - [European Antisemitism from its Origins to the Holocaust](#)
- Overview of the Holocaust [2-Day](#) and [4-Day](#) Lessons
- [Timeline Activity Lesson](#)
- [Curators Corner](#)
- [Some Were Neighbors](#) Online Exhibition
- [History of Antisemitism Lesson](#)