

# The Holocaust: History and Memory

## Overview

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of 6 million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were “racially superior” and that the Jews, deemed “inferior,” were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived racial and biological inferiority: Roma (Gypsies), people with disabilities, and some Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups, such as Communists, Socialists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals, were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a living memorial to the Holocaust. The museum inspires citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity. Located among America’s national monuments to freedom on the National Mall, the museum provides a powerful lesson on the fragility of freedom, the myth of progress, and the need for vigilance in preserving democratic values.

In this activity, students will travel to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to examine how the museum uses artifacts and photographs from its collections to present the history of the Holocaust and memorialize the victims, including artifacts and photographs that illustrate important aspects of Holocaust history, such as Torah scrolls rescued during Kristallnacht, a train car, prisoner barracks from Auschwitz, and a gas chamber model. They will also tour the museum’s architecture. Then students will discuss what makes the museum a living memorial.

***This lesson plan was created in conjunction with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.***

## Objectives

In this lesson, students will learn to

- describe the design, meaning, and purpose of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a history museum and living memorial
- understand key events and topics related to the Holocaust
- explain the systematic nature, scope, and consequences of the Holocaust

## Classroom Activity

- One to two 45-minute class periods

## Introduce

Tell students that today they will visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Find out what students already know about the Holocaust and the museum, as well as what questions they have. Define the Holocaust, and then describe the Museum’s mission. Explain to students that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a special kind of museum—designed to present history, memorialize the dead, and inspire action to prevent genocide. During the tour, they will be exploring how the museum preserves and presents Holocaust history. This Expedition will begin with an examination of how the museum building itself speaks about the Holocaust; the Expedition continues in 1938, 5 years after the Nazis came to power, with a presentation of artifacts and photographs in the main exhibition that illustrate how the Nazis identified, segregated, concentrated, deported, and killed millions of Jews during the Holocaust. The Expedition closes with a discussion of what it means to preserve history and act as a living memorial.

## Teach

1. Guide students through the HMH Field Trip ***The Holocaust: History and Memory***. As students look at each scene using their viewers, read the information that appears to the class. Tap on each point of interest to direct students’ attention, then share the additional information. Each scene includes a set of leveled questions that you can use to check students’ understanding

and to encourage critical thinking. At the end of the field trip, have students put their viewers down.

2. Briefly discuss with students what they have learned from the field trip. Which photos and artifacts had the greatest impact on them? Why?
3. Discuss what the field trip revealed about the systematic nature, scope, and consequences of the Holocaust. Ask students, “In this Expedition, what changes did you observe in the experiences of Jews?” ([The Expedition progresses from Kristallnacht in late 1938 through the Nazi creation of ghettos in occupied Eastern Europe, deportations to the camps, life in the camps, and mass killings in gas chambers. The artifacts and photographs illustrate how Jewish life under Nazi rule progressed through stages of dehumanization and loss—including social isolation, legal discrimination and segregation, confiscation of property, forced removal, deportation, imprisonment, and ultimately death.](#))

## Close

Discuss how the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum uses its collections and exhibitions, and even the building design, to teach about the Holocaust and memorialize the Nazis’ victims. Reflect on Elie Wiesel’s desire that the museum be a living memorial—as he said, “a memorial unresponsive to the future would violate the memory of the past.” Students should share their thoughts on actions they think people can take to honor victims of the Holocaust.

## Teaching Tips and Information

Confronting the history and legacy of the Holocaust can be upsetting to students. Be aware of students’ emotions during this lesson, and acknowledge that the Holocaust is a complex and difficult topic to learn about.

Before this lesson, you may want to review the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s [Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust](#).

To frame an Expedition within the broader historical context and promote student understanding of how and why the Holocaust happened, you may begin a lesson with a 38-minute documentary called [The Path to Nazi Genocide](#). This film

includes graphic imagery; so, please preview the film before screening it with students. A [study guide](#) is available to help you in guiding students through a discussion of how and why the Holocaust happened.

For additional background, you and your students may reference the museum’s [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#).

## Short Videos That Complement the Expedition

### ***Life Before the Holocaust***

[Fragments of Childhood: The de Groot Family Home Movies \(Curators Corner #36\)](#)

[A Life Left Behind: The Lean Grochowska Gutman Collection \(Curators Corner #42\)](#)

### ***Kristallnacht***

[Survivors Remember Kristallnacht](#)

### ***Ghettos***

[Interview with Judy Cohen: “Voices from the Lodz Ghetto”](#)

[Conversations with survivors from the Lodz ghetto](#)

### ***Rail Car***

[A Letter Thrown from a Train](#)

[Holocaust survivor Leo Schneiderman describes arrival at Auschwitz](#)

### ***Auschwitz Barracks***

[Encountering Auschwitz](#)

[“To the Memory of My Parents”: Michael Kraus’s Diaries \(Curators Corner #10\)](#)

[Aerial Photography and the Holocaust: The Dino A. Brugioni Collection \(Curators Corner #32\)](#)

### ***Gas Chamber Model***

[Holocaust survivor Sam Itzkowitz describes the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau](#)

### ***The Conservation Lab***

[Secrets Inside: How a Boy’s Bear Helped a Family Escape Nazi Persecution \(Curators Corner #34\)](#)