

Five Day Unit Plan**Essential Questions:**

- How do prejudice, discrimination, and dehumanization escalate over time, leading to acts of genocide?
- How do ideologies circulate within societies and influence individuals and groups?
- What factors can lead to the breakdown of democracy in a society?
- How has antisemitism transformed over time and how have certain elements remained the same?
- How did societal attitudes and government policies progress from bias and discrimination to mass violence and genocide?
- What moral and ethical dilemmas did individuals face during the Holocaust?
- What roles did collaboration, complicity, and resistance play in shaping the course of the Holocaust?
- How can studying the Holocaust help us combat contemporary forms of discrimination and hate?

Subjects

Multidisciplinary

Grades

9-12

Unit Objectives:

- Understand the historical causes and progression of the Holocaust.
- Investigate the historical, social, and political factors that contributed to the development of antisemitic ideologies.
- Examine how social, economic, and political factors can weaken democratic institutions, making them susceptible to authoritarian influences.
- Explain how the experiences of Holocaust victims varied based on time, place, and circumstances.
- Reflect on the difficult “choiceless choices” faced by individuals in extreme circumstances, considering how factors such as fear of retaliation, family circumstances, and community affected decisions.
- Reflect on contemporary examples of prejudice and discrimination and discuss the parallels to historical events.

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT FOR THIS LESSON

Teachers often have limited time to teach about the Holocaust. This presents challenges to ensuring the content, context, and complexity are adequately addressed. It's important for the students to know that this unit is not a comprehensive study of the Holocaust. Instead, these lessons are intended to give students a window into the history and the choices made that contributed to genocide. This unit is intentionally flexible to allow for modifications.

Teaching strategies are suggested in the unit sequence, however please use other strategies if they better support the learning needs of your students.

Note for Teachers: Before beginning any lessons on the Holocaust, we highly recommend closely reviewing the USHMM [Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust](#). We also highly encourage creating a safe and respectful learning environment by engaging your students in the activities provided by Facing History's guide "[Fostering Civil Discourse: Difficult Classroom Conversations in a Diverse Democracy](#)".

EXTERNAL LINKS

- [Essential Topics to Teach About the Holocaust](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions about the Holocaust for Educators](#)
- [Students' Toughest Questions](#)
- [Resource Evaluation Rubric](#)
- [Echoes and Reflections Timeline of the Holocaust](#)
- [USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- [Pyramid of Hate](#)
- [Holocaust definitions](#)
- [Holocaust Definitions: Sorting It Out Handout](#)
- [What is Antisemitism?](#)
- [Hitler's Rise to Power, 1918–1933](#)
- [Individual Profile card](#)
- [Step By Step: Phases of the Holocaust](#)
- [Photograph of the burning of the Boemestrasse Synagogue](#)
- [Vilna Ghetto interactive exhibit](#)
- [How Should We Study the Final Solution?](#)
- [Last Letters from the Holocaust](#)

UNIT SEQUENCE**DAY ONE**

Introduce students to the [Pyramid of Hate](#), discussing examples that illustrate the progression through each part of the pyramid.

Break students into small groups, and provide each with a copy of the Pyramid of Hate. Have the groups work to identify two to three examples for each section of the pyramid, writing them in the corresponding section of the Pyramid. As a class, discuss their examples.

- Which sections of the pyramid are mainly actions taken by individuals?
- Which sections focus on acts by a government or groups working for a government?
- Do events always follow an upward progression or are they nonsequential (ie: do acts of discrimination always precede violence or can the order vary)?

Provide students with a copy of [Holocaust definitions](#) developed by different museums. As they study these definitions, have students fill out the [Holocaust Definitions: Sorting It Out Handout](#), which can be used to facilitate a class discussion.

Extension Activity: [How Does Hate Escalate? An Examination of the Past & Present](#) (IWitness)

DAY TWO

Have students complete the “[What is Antisemitism?](#)” IWitness InfoQuest, which should take approximately 25 minutes.

Show students the video [Hitler’s Rise to Power, 1918–1933](#) (09:30) looking at the beginning of the Nazi Party in the early years of the Weimar Republic and the party’s growth during the 1920s. Debrief by reviewing the questions below and discussing students’ responses. You can debrief as a whole class or have students work in small groups.

- How did German soldiers who returned from WWI impact German politics? How did the Nazi Party explain Germany’s loss in WWI?
-

- What was the Nazis' primary message in the early 1930s? How was it different from what we now know were the Nazis' primary goals for Germany?
- What choices made by others contributed to Hitler and the Nazi Party's eventual rise to power in Germany?
- Respond to the quote from novelist Margaret Atwood. *"The fabric of democracy is always fragile everywhere because it depends on the will of citizens to protect it, and when they become scared, when it becomes dangerous for them to defend it, it can go very quickly."*

Assign an [Individual Profile card](#) to each student, having them underline or highlight the major events that impacted that person's experience during the Holocaust. As a class, discuss what can be learned by looking at a single person's experiences and what they reveal about the Holocaust.

Extension Activities: [Why Didn't Antisemitism End After the Holocaust?](#) (IWitness)
[Democracy Crumbled? Why was German society vulnerable to the rise of Nazism?](#) IWitness Mini Quest.

DAY THREE

Show students the video "[Step By Step: Phases of the Holocaust](#)" (6:45) with the accompanying comprehension and reflection questions:

- According to the video, what are the different phases of the Holocaust?
 - What role did laws, propaganda, and social exclusion play in preparing the ground for mass violence? What examples from the video that illustrate these tactics?
 - What choices did individuals and groups have at different points in the Holocaust's progression? What factors influenced their decisions?
 - Why is it important to study the Holocaust in phases rather than as a single event? How does this connect with what we studied about the Pyramid of Hate?
 - How does this video challenge or deepen your understanding of the Holocaust?
-

Project the [photograph](#) of the burning of the Boemestrasse Synagogue in Frankfurt, Germany in November 1938 without providing any contextual information. In partners, have students discuss:

- What do you notice in this image? (Focus on details like the smoke, flames, people's reactions, uniforms, and setting.)
- What emotions or messages do you think this image conveys? (Who took the photo, who is in it, and what they might be feeling?)

After discussing students' responses, explain the [context](#) of the photograph.

- What was the significance of the destruction of *cultural* institutions, such as synagogues?
- What message did this communicate to Jewish people? To German society as a whole?
- Where on the Pyramid of Hate would you place the events of Kristallnacht? Explain.

Teacher Note: It is helpful to define the term *pogrom* to students as “an organized massacre of helpless people; in this case a massacre of Jews”.

Extension Activity: [Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration & Complicity in the Holocaust](#) | Witness Mini Quest.

DAY FOUR

Discuss the importance of diaries in understanding history. Jewish diaries offer unique, personal accounts of the Holocaust. These writers, who were motivated to record their experiences for a variety of reasons, had different identities, national traditions, education levels, faiths, politics, and ages, allowing for a much broader understanding of the variety of experiences during the Holocaust.

Explain to students that in this activity they will be exploring the diary of Yitskhok Rudashevski, a Jewish teenager who recorded his experiences living in the Vilna Ghetto, through an [interactive exhibit](#).

As students explore the interactive exhibit, they should take notes on key themes, emotions, and historical details they notice. Divide students into small groups to discuss their findings, using the prompts below to guide the discussion.

- What can we learn from diaries written during the Holocaust?
- How should we evaluate Holocaust-era diaries as historical sources?
- How does his perspective as a teenager shape his observations of life in the Vilna Ghetto?
- What aspects of daily life in the ghetto stood out to you?
- How did Rudashevski and other young people try to maintain a sense of normalcy?
- What examples of hope, resilience, or resistance appear in his writings?
- How does Rudashevski's account deepen your understanding of the Holocaust?

Extension Activity: [Writing as Resistance to Injustice](#)

DAY FIVE

Distribute the handout [How Should We Study the Final Solution?](#) Have students, individually or in pairs, explain how they interpreted the poem in light of the statistics on the Final Solution. Discuss the importance of recognizing “the one” rather than just statistics of the masses.

Discuss the significance of personal letters as historical documents, similar to the diaries discussed last class. Explain to students that many Holocaust victims wrote final letters to loved ones before being deported or executed. Ask students to consider: *If you had only one letter to send to the world, what would you say?*

Provide students, either individually or in pairs, with different letters from the [Last Letters from the Holocaust](#) project. Have them read their assigned letter closely, annotating key emotions, historical details, and any references to family, faith, hope, or despair.

- What is the tone of the letter (e.g., hopeful, fearful, resigned, loving, desperate)?
- What emotions are conveyed? Provide examples.
- What specific details does the writer include about their situation? What does this reveal about the daily life or the struggles of Holocaust victims?
- Are there any requests, warnings, or final words of wisdom from the writer?
- What questions do you have after reading this letter?
- How does this letter challenge or deepen your understanding of the Holocaust?

Have students share their key takeaways in small groups or as a whole class discussion. Pose the following reflection questions to guide the discussion:

- What can we learn from letters written during the Holocaust?
- How should we evaluate Holocaust-era letters as historical sources?
- How do these letters challenge or deepen our understanding of the Holocaust?

Extension Activity: [Why Do We Remember?](#)

CROSS CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

- [“Life in the Ghettos”](#) An adaptable lesson from the Museum of Jewish Heritage examining life in the ghetto through primary sources, including photographs and diary entries of Jewish children and teenagers who lived in the ghettos.
- [“Children in the Ghetto Interactive Learning Environment”](#) A lesson from Yad Vashem for grades 4-6 that deals with children's lives in the ghettos during the Holocaust period and describes life during the Holocaust from the perspective of children living in the ghettos

Art & Music

- **Art as Resistance:** Study artwork created in ghettos and concentration camps, such as children’s drawings from Terezín, and discuss how art serves as a form of defiance and documentation.
- **Music of the Holocaust:** Explore compositions created by Jewish musicians in camps and ghettos and analyze lyrics for themes of resistance and hope.

STANDARDS

- **6.2.12.CivicsHR.4.a:** Analyze the motivations, causes, and consequences of the genocides of Armenians, Ukrainians, Jews in the Holocaust and assess the responses by individuals, groups, and governments and analyze large-scale atrocities including 20th century massacres in China.
- **6.2.12.HistoryCC.4.c:** Analyze the extent to which the legacy of World War I, the global depression, ethnic and ideological conflicts, imperialism, and traditional political or economic rivalries caused World War II.
- **6.2.12.CivicsPI.4.a:** Compare and contrast socialism, communism, fascism, and liberal democracy, analyze the extent to which they promote and protect civil, political, social and economic rights for people, and explain the reasons for their growth or decline around the world.
- **6.2.12.HistoryUP.4.c:** Compare and contrast the actions of individuals as perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers during events of persecution or genocide, and describe the long-term consequences of genocide for all involved.