

Educator Preparation Guide: Teaching the Holocaust in High School U.S. History

Teaching about the Holocaust is a vital responsibility that requires care, nuance, and clarity. In high school world history, this unit offers students an opportunity to understand how mass atrocity takes shape—through ideology, law, propaganda, silence, and complicity—and how individuals, institutions, and nations respond.

This unit does not ask students to memorize dates or numbers. It asks them to wrestle with human choices, examine how injustice is normalized, and evaluate what justice looks like in the aftermath of injustice. The Holocaust is both a specific event and a universal warning—and this unit helps students explore that tension through inquiry, primary sources, and civic reflection.

Why This Unit Matters

- The Holocaust illustrates how a modern, bureaucratic society can descend into genocide—and what factors make that possible.
- Students analyze individual and collective responsibility, tracing how myths and policies evolve into mass violence.
- The unit supports civic development by asking students to apply historical lessons to modern injustice
- Students develop critical thinking, source analysis, media literacy, and ethical reasoning through direct engagement with survivor voices and historical documents.
- By connecting global history to present-day questions, this unit encourages students to become more informed and active participants in their world.

Recommended Resources

- USHMM | Teaching Materials Overview: www.ushmm.org
- Echoes & Reflections: www.echoesandreflections.org
- Facing History and Ourselves: www.facinghistory.org

Framing, Language and Terminology

How we frame Holocaust education—through our language, emphasis, and guiding questions—directly shapes students’ understanding of antisemitism, identity, and genocide. Many students (and educators) bring limited or oversimplified knowledge of the Holocaust and may not fully grasp the diversity of Jewish life or the mechanisms

by which hate becomes systemic. This unit is an opportunity to replace flawed narratives with historically grounded, humanizing, and nuanced understandings.

Language

Instead of	Consider	Because
The Jews	Jewish people or Jewish communities	Avoids generalizations and centers humanity and diversity
Jewish religion	Jewish identity or Jewish people	Jewish identity can be religious, cultural, ethnic, or secular
Concentration camps (as a catch-all)	Be specific: labor camps, death camps, transit camps	Clarifies function and intention of different Nazi camp systems
Final Solution (without context)	Nazi plan to murder the Jews of Europe	Avoids euphemisms; reinforces genocidal intent
Others were persecuted too (to minimize Jewish targeting)	Other groups were targeted for persecution, but only Jewish people were targeted for complete annihilation	Provides a clear distinction between groups who were persecuted vs the only group who were specifically targeted for complete annihilation

Common Misconceptions to Disrupt

Misconception	Reframing Guidance
All Jewish people are the same	Emphasize that Jewish identity includes a wide range of cultural, ethnic, and religious experiences across time and geography.
Antisemitism began with Hitler	Provide historical examples of antisemitism in Europe before the 20th century, including laws, myths, and discrimination.
Jewish people went to the camps without resistance	Highlight examples of spiritual, cultural, and armed resistance; resistance was shaped by context, resources, and risk.

Only Jewish people were targeted	Clarify that while other groups were also persecuted, only Jews were targeted for complete annihilation.
Genocide happens suddenly	Help students trace the incremental stages of progression in propaganda, laws, and institutional actions that built towards mass violence over time.
Other countries didn't know until it was too late	Primary sources consistently demonstrate that governments, leaders, and many ordinary citizens (through newspaper coverage) were aware of the persecution of Jewish people in Nazi Germany and Nazi-controlled Europe.

Supporting Question 1: How did nationalism and Nazism gain support in Germany in the 1930s?

Historical and Cultural Context

- After World War I, Germany faced political instability, economic depression, and resentment over the Treaty of Versailles.
- Nationalism and fascism promised renewal, scapegoating minorities and blaming democracy for national weakness.
- Nazi ideology built on centuries of antisemitism, portraying Jews as a threat to German identity and prosperity.
- Early propaganda and laws normalized exclusion and created conditions for widespread acceptance of Nazi ideology.

Key Concepts for Educators

- Extremist movements thrive in times of crisis; highlight how economic and political instability fueled support for Nazism.
- Propaganda and charismatic leadership shaped public opinion and normalized hate.
- Students should distinguish between nationalism as civic pride and nationalism as exclusionary ideology.
- Use the USHMM definition of the Holocaust and the Path to Nazi Genocide film (Chapters 1-3) to ground students in historical context.

Recommended Resources

- USHMM | [Path to Nazi Genocide](#) (Chapters 1–3)
- USHMM | [Overview of the Holocaust Lesson](#) (4-Day Lesson)

Supporting Question 2: How did the cover of war impact the implementation of Nazi ideology?

Historical and Cultural Context

- World War II provided both opportunity and cover for the Nazis to escalate persecution into genocide.
- Wartime chaos enabled secrecy, mass deportations, and the expansion of killing centers.
- Military conquest extended Nazi control over millions of Jews and other targeted groups across Europe.
- The war blurred lines between military operations and genocidal policies, allowing radical measures to be enacted without scrutiny.

Key Concepts for Educators

- War created conditions where radical policies could be implemented more easily and hidden from public view.
- Students should examine how wartime conditions accelerated the Nazis' ability to carry out the "Final Solution."
- Highlight the role of bureaucracy and logistics in enabling mass murder.
- Use the Path to Nazi Genocide (Chapter 4), the Timeline Activity, and the Holocaust Encyclopedia article on implementation to connect war directly to genocide.

Recommended Resources

- USHMM | [Path to Nazi Genocide \(Chapter 4\)](#)
- USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia Article | ["How did the Nazis and their collaborators implement the Holocaust?"](#)
- USHMM | [Overview of the Holocaust Lesson](#) (4-Day Lesson)

Supporting Question 3: How and why did the Nazis and their collaborators systemically target Jews and others?

Historical and Cultural Context

- Nazi persecution unfolded through identifiable categories: propaganda, exclusionary laws, ghettos, confiscation of property, deportation, forced labor, and mass killing.
- These actions were systematic and escalated step-by-step, often under the cover of war.
- Collaboration and complicity extended beyond Nazi officials to ordinary citizens, neighbors, and local authorities across occupied Europe.
- Primary sources reveal how persecution was experienced in daily life and how ordinary people participated, witnessed, or resisted.

Key Concepts for Educators

- Help students trace the incremental escalation of Nazi policies, showing how genocide develops gradually.
- Emphasize the systemic categories of persecution and how each reinforced the others.
- Guide students to analyze ordinary people's roles--complicity, opportunism, indifference, and resistance--to highlight moral choices.
- Use primary sources to connect abstract categories to lived experience, making the history tangible.
- Clarify distinctions between persecution of multiple groups and the unique Nazi goal of total annihilation of Jews.

Recommended Resources

- USHMM | [Overview of the Holocaust Lesson](#) (4-Day Lesson)
- USHMM Lesson Packet 5, [Antisemitic Propaganda](#) |
- USHMM | Lesson Packet 4, [Exclusion and Legal Discrimination](#)
- USHMM | Lesson Packet 2, [Physical Separation and Ghettos](#)
- USHMM | Lesson Packet 6, [Theft and Confiscation of Property](#)
- USHMM | Lesson Packet 1, [Deportation](#)
- USHMM | Lesson Packet 7, [Concentration Camps and Forced Labor](#)
- USHMM | Lesson Packet 3, [Mass Killing](#)

- USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia Article | ["How and why did ordinary people across Europe contribute to the persecution of their Jewish Neighbors?"](#)

Supporting Question 4: How did individual Jewish people experience these events?

Historical and Cultural Context

- Jewish individuals experienced persecution through propaganda, exclusion, ghettos, deportation, forced labor, and mass killing.
- Experiences varied by geography, age, gender, and circumstance, but all were shaped by systemic dehumanization.
- Profile cards and survivor testimonies reveal how these categories impacted daily life and how ordinary people (neighbors, friends, strangers) influenced outcomes.
- Personal stories highlight resilience, suffering, and the human impact of genocide, while also showing acts of resistance and continuity.

Key Concepts for Educators

- Center individual voices to humanize history and avoid abstraction.
- Highlight the diversity of Jewish experiences--urban vs rural, religious vs secular, youth vs adult.
- Encourage students to connect personal narratives to broader historical processes, seeing how systemic persecution translated into lived realities.
- Use these narratives to foster empathy and ethical reflection, helping students grapple with moral responsibility.
- Show how studying individual experiences deepens understanding of both the Holocaust's scope and its personal consequences.

Recommended Resources

- USHMM | [Timeline Activity Profile Cards](#)
- USHMM | [Timeline Activity](#) (Instructions)
- USHMM | Podcast Episode, [“Holocaust Survivors’ Reflections and Hopes for the Future”](#)