

Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust

<https://holocaust.georgia.gov/guidelines-teaching-about-holocaust>

Teaching Holocaust history demands a high level of sensitivity and keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter. The following guidelines from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, while reflecting approaches appropriate for effective teaching in general, are particularly relevant to Holocaust education. The Georgia Commission on the Holocaust structures their resources and programs according to these guidelines.

Define the term “Holocaust.”

The Holocaust is the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims -- six million were murdered; Roma and Sinti (Gypsies), people with mental and physical disabilities, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including gay men, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi Germany.

Do not teach or imply that the Holocaust was inevitable.

The Holocaust did not have to happen. The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups, and nations made decisions to act or not to act. Focusing on those decisions leads to insights into history and human nature and can help your students to become critical thinkers.

Avoid simple answers to complex questions.

The history of the Holocaust raises difficult questions about human behavior and the context within which individual decisions are made. Be wary of simplification. Allow students to think about the many factors and events that contributed to the Holocaust and that often-made decision making difficult and uncertain.

Strive for precision of language.

Because of the complexity of Holocaust history, students may generalize and distort the facts (e.g., “all concentration camps were killing centers” or “all Germans were collaborators”). Encourage them to distinguish the differences between prejudice and discrimination, collaborators and bystanders, armed and spiritual resistance, direct and assumed orders, concentration camps and killing centers, and guilt and responsibility.

Words that describe human behavior often have multiple meanings. Resistance usually refers to a physical act of armed revolt. During the Holocaust, it also encompassed partisan activity; the smuggling of messages, food, and weapons; sabotage; and actual military engagement. Resistance may also be willful disobedience, such as continuing to

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practice religious and cultural traditions in defiance of the rules or creating fine art, music, and poetry inside ghettos and concentration camps. For many, simply

maintaining the will to live in the face of abject brutality was an act of spiritual resistance.

Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions. Though all Jews were targeted for destruction by the Nazis, the experiences of all Jews were not the same. Not all Germans can be characterized as Nazis, nor should any nationality be reduced to a singular or one-dimensional description.

Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust.

Students may express empathy for victims of mass murder. Sometimes, however, they may assume that the victims may have done something to justify the actions against them and may blame the victims themselves. Encourage students is to categorize participants' behaviors during the Holocaust as either victims, perpetrators, rescuers, or bystanders. Examine the actions, motives, and decisions of each group. Portray members of all groups as capable of moral judgment and independent decision-making.

Students should make careful distinctions about sources of information. They should consider why a text was written, who wrote it, who the intended audience was, whether any biases influenced the information, whether any gaps occurred in discussion, whether omissions in certain passages were inadvertent or not, and how the information has been used to interpret various events. Encourage students to investigate the origin and authorship of all material, particularly material on the Internet.

Avoid comparisons of pain.

One should not presume that the horror of an individual, family, or community destroyed by the Nazis was greater than that experienced by victims of other genocides. Avoid generalizations that suggest exclusivity such as "The victims of the Holocaust suffered the most cruelty ever faced by a people in the history of humanity."

Do not romanticize history.

People who risked their lives to rescue victims of Nazi oppression provide useful, important, and compelling role models for students. But given that only a small fraction of non-Jews under Nazi occupation helped rescue Jews, an overemphasis on heroic actions can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of the history. Historical accuracy and a balanced perspective are necessary.

Contextualize the history.

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Study the Holocaust in the context of European history to give students a perspective on the precedents and circumstances that may have contributed to it. When thinking about resistance, consider when and where an act took place; the consequences of one's actions to self and family; the degree of control the Nazis had on a country or local population; the cultural attitudes of particular populations toward different victim groups; and the

availability and risk of potential hiding places. Contextualization helps students see that victims have other qualities. Expose students to the cultural contributions and achievements of 2,000 years of European Jewish life. This helps balance their perception of Jews as just victims.

Translate statistics into people.

In any study of the Holocaust, the sheer number of victims challenges easy comprehension. Show that individual people—grandparents, parents, and children—are behind the statistics and emphasize the diversity of personal experiences within the larger historical narrative. First-person accounts and memoirs add individual voices to a collective experience and help students understand the statistics.

Make responsible methodological choices.

Use graphic material judiciously. Select images and texts that do not exploit the students' emotional vulnerability or that might be disrespectful to the victims themselves. Avoid simulations. These activities often allow students to forget the purpose of the lesson or leave them with the impression that they know what it was like to suffer or participate during the Holocaust. Avoid trivializing activities. Word scrambles, crossword puzzles, counting objects, model building, and other gimmicky exercises do not encourage critical analysis but lead to low-level thinking and trivialization of the history.