

# **Studying the Holocaust Through Film and Literature**

## **Human Rights and Social Responsibility**

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\*Excerpts used with permission of Dr. Miriam Klein Kassenoff as a study guide for teaching the Holocaust using film.

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# Introduction

The Ashes of Auschwitz are everywhere.

-*Elie Wiesel*

Why teach the past? Why teach about something that happened in the last century? Why teach about the Nazi Holocaust in the 21st century?

After the devastating events of September 11, 2001, the lessons of the past are even more compelling. The lessons of the past will help us to deal with the tragedies of today and inspire us as we build tomorrow. The lessons of the past offer hope as we invite a new generation to guide their lives with a deep regard for humanity, a commitment to the values of caring and respect for others, and the development of a strong moral and ethical fiber that will enable them to stand up for what they believe in and speak out against injustice.

At the cornerstone of education is history. Only as we become aware of how the past has shaped the present can we build a more positive future. Today more than ever, the study of the events of the Holocaust and its lessons are vital. As the Holocaust is studied, students discover significant truths about human nature and the importance of compassion and the courage of the human spirit.

At the core of Holocaust education are lessons for life, lessons that will guide generations of students as they establish goals and take responsibility for themselves and one another in building a community that celebrates the diversity that exists among us. Every day the news is filled with accounts of racial hatred and genocide. Yet these acts of prejudice and persecution continue, and the world watches. Students must become aware of the devastating effects of prejudice, indifference, and apathy. Students must be guided in the ideals of human decency and moral courage.

Through a study of the Holocaust, students are inspired to take a stand for what they believe in and to recognize that certain universal values of right and wrong must be upheld. Most important, they need to recognize that each individual has the potential to effect change.

*Studying the Holocaust Through Film and Literature: Human Rights and Social Responsibility* bridges the past, present, and future. We must teach the history and events of the Holocaust first. Students must know what occurred during the years 1933-1945 that almost destroyed an entire culture, the Jewish people of Eastern Europe, as well as millions of other innocent people. Yehuda Bauer, the esteemed Holocaust scholar, has said, "The Holocaust can either be a precedent or a warning." It is the intention of this book to teach the events of the Holocaust as a warning. However, as we have entered a new century, a knowledge of the history is not enough. We must teach the moral and ethical lessons that have evolved from the Holocaust so that students can connect these with the moral dilemmas they face in their own lives.

Yad Vashem, the Center for World Holocaust Studies in Jerusalem, Israel, teaches three main lessons to be learned from the Holocaust that address moral and ethical issues. These three lessons can be connected to any aspect of life and are the threads that run through the issues explored in this book. These three lessons must be considered as we reflect on the choices we make in our daily lives:

1. Thou shalt not be a victim.
2. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator.
3. Thou shalt not be a bystander.

### ***Character Education and Core Values***

In addition to dealing with major ethical and moral issues of human rights and social responsibility, “studying the Holocaust addresses” the issues of courage, compassion, character, and civility that determine an individual’s behavior on a daily basis and include the core values of citizenship, cooperation, fairness, honesty, integrity, kindness, empathy, respect, and responsibility.

It is highly recommended that teachers preview all films and literature to ensure that they are appropriate for individual classrooms and students

## **Main Objectives:**

The main objectives are twofold: (a) to teach the Holocaust and its lessons about human behavior and to try and understand why such events occur, and (b) to clarify and strengthen students’ conviction about the code of conduct they will adopt as they face life’s decisions and help them to envision their place in the world.

To achieve these goals, “teachers should consider the following:

1. *Critical Thinking and Discussion:* Socratic questions invite students to clarify their own understandings and judgments, strengthen their moral courage, and develop a strategy for problem solving and decision making. A core question that should be asked is “What lesson(s) did you learn from this memoir or film that will influence your life today and choices you make?” Questions can be used as a basis for group discussion and either formal or informal debate.
2. *Reflections in Writing:* Writing topics encourage students to analyze and synthesize what they have learned and address specific issues as they strive for deeper meaning and understanding.
3. *Researching the History:* Individual and group projects stimulate further

research and understanding about the Holocaust and connect ideas presented with current events affecting their life

Scroll Down:



The History Place, [www.historyplace.com](http://www.historyplace.com), also provides historical information and a comprehensive timeline of the Holocaust.

The *Holocaust Chronicle* Web site, [www.holocaustchronicle.org](http://www.holocaustchronicle.org), includes more than 800 pages of Holocaust history on-line.

### ***Setting Up the Classroom and Finding the Right Resources***

Fill your room with appropriate maps, news articles, encyclopedias, and reference books to help students in their research.

### ***Survivor Visitation***

A study of the Holocaust is incomplete without first-person testimony. Survivors provide a rich and powerful experience and bring history to life. The best time to have a survivor speak with your class is after students have studied the history of the Holocaust and have a basis for understanding.

**PLEASE NOTE: If you are in South Florida, you can arrange a tour of the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach that includes meeting a Holocaust Survivor and an interpretive tour of the Memorial led by an experienced docent. Go to [holocaustmemorialmiamibeach.org](http://holocaustmemorialmiamibeach.org) and click on the book a field trip link.**

### ***Journal Writing***

All students should keep a journal to record their reactions and reflections as they take part in the study of the Holocaust and the moral and ethical issues involved. Journal writing is often cathartic, allowing students to sort out their feelings and express their emotions. In addition, it gives them the opportunity to search for their own meanings and draw conclusions.

## ***Film Critique***

Have students analyze various movie critiques from newspapers and magazines so that they are aware of the way in which such critiques are written. As students view the various films suggested in this book, have them write critiques and then select a few to be distributed to the rest of the school through e-mail or closed-circuit TV.

### **Guidelines for Teaching the Holocaust Through Film and Literature**

1. Depending upon your time limitations you can choose specific topics to cover. For example, if you have 3 weeks to dedicate to Holocaust study, along with a summarized history of the Holocaust you might choose "The World of the Persecuted" or "The Holocaust, Human Rights, and Social Responsibility," as areas of discussion and for lesson plans.
2. Once you have determined which topics you wish to focus on, select the related literature and film most appropriate for your students' abilities.+ (**\*You can select one of the documentaries streaming on the Holocaust Memorial website or choose a film to check out from the library: [http://holocaustmemorialmiamibeach.org/dvd\\_lending\\_library/](http://holocaustmemorialmiamibeach.org/dvd_lending_library/)).**)
3. Always preview the film and literature before introducing them to students.
4. Excerpts, excerpts, excerpts!!! In almost every instance, the films do not have to be used in their entirety. In fact, we encourage using selected excerpts from films and to augment your study of specific topics. For example, the film *Conspiracy* (*available from the Holocaust Memorial DVD library*) has an excellent 3- to 5-minute scene which clearly portrays the 15 Nazi perpetrators who made the decision to murder all the Jews of Europe. The entire film need not be shown.
5. Character education is mandated in many states today. A study of the Holocaust is a perfect vehicle for lessons in character development and values. We encourage you to use the films and literature to discuss the moral and ethical issues included at the end of each topic in this book.

6. **In addition to the films available via the Holocaust Memorial DVD lending library and video streaming collection**, many appropriate films can be borrowed from the following: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org) (click on "resources"), and from the National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University, [www.jewishfilm.org](http://www.jewishfilm.org). In addition, many of the films are available at your public library system, university, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Bookstore ([www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)), and Social Studies School Service ([www.socialstudies.com](http://www.socialstudies.com)) as well as Amazon.

As a final note on *Guidelines*, we re-emphasize the importance of sensitivity to appropriate visual images for teaching purposes by the following from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum "Methodological Considerations" see p. 13 (Part I). Reprinted with permission from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Be sensitive to appropriate written and audiovisual content.

One of the primary concerns of educators teaching the history of the Holocaust is how to present horrific images in a sensitive and appropriate manner. Graphic material should be used judiciously and only to the extent necessary to achieve the objective of the lesson. You should remind yourself that each student and each class is different and that what seems appropriate for one may not be appropriate for all.

Students are essentially a "captive audience." When you assault them with images of horror for which they are unprepared, you violate a basic trust: the obligation of a teacher to provide a "safe" learning environment. The assumption that all students will seek to understand human behavior after being exposed to horrible images is fallacious. Some students may be so appalled by images of brutality and mass murder that they are discouraged from studying the subject further. Others may become fascinated in a more voyeuristic fashion, subordinating further critical analysis of the history to the superficial titillation of looking at images of starvation, disfigurement, and death. Though they can be powerful tools, shocking images of mass killings and barbarisms should not overwhelm a student's awareness of the broader scope of events within Holocaust history. Try to select images and texts that do not exploit the students' emotional vulnerability or that might be construed as disrespectful of the victims themselves.

From: *Teaching About the Holocaust: A Resource Book for Educators*. Reprinted with permission from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC.

## **METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The teaching of Holocaust history demands of educators a high level of sensitivity and a keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter. The recommendations that follow, while reflecting methodological approaches that would be appropriate to effective teaching in general, are particularly relevant in the context of Holocaust education.

### **1. Define the term "Holocaust."**

The Holocaust refers to a specific genocidal event in twentieth-century history: 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—6 million were murdered; Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

### **2. Avoid comparisons of pain.**

A study of the Holocaust should always highlight the different policies carried out by the Nazi regime toward various groups of people; however, these distinctions should not be presented as a basis for comparison of suffering between those groups. Similarly, one cannot presume that the horror of an individual, family, or community destroyed by the Nazis was any 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."

### **3. Avoid simple answers to complex history.**

A study of the Holocaust raises difficult questions about human behavior, and it often involves complicated answers as to why events occurred. Be wary of oversimplifications. Allow students to contemplate the various factors that contributed to the Holocaust; do not attempt to reduce Holocaust history to one or two catalysts in isolation from the other factors that came into play. For example, the Holocaust was not simply the logical and inevitable consequence of unbridled racism.

Rather, racism combined with centuries-old bigotry and antisemitism; renewed by a nationalistic fervor that emerged in Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century; fueled by Germany's defeat in World War I and its national humiliation following the Treaty of Versailles; exacerbated by worldwide economic hard times, the ineffectiveness of the Weimar Republic, and international indifference; and catalyzed by the political charisma and manipulative propaganda of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime contributed to the occurrence of the Holocaust.

### **4. Just because it happened does not mean it was inevitable.**

Too often students have the simplistic impression that the Holocaust was inevitable. Just because a historical event took place, and it was documented in textbooks and on film, does not mean that it had to happen. This seemingly obvious concept is often overlooked by students and teachers alike. The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups, and nations made decisions to act or not to act. By focusing on those decisions, you gain insight into history and human nature and can better help your students to become critical thinkers.

**5. Strive for precision of language.**

Any study of the Holocaust touches upon nuances of human behavior. Because of the complexity of the history, there is a temptation to overgeneralize and thus to distort the facts (e.g., “all concentration camps were killing centers” or “all Germans were collaborators”). Rather, you must strive to help your students clarify the information presented and encourage them to distinguish the differences between prejudice and discrimination, collaborators and bystanders, armed and spiritual resistance, direct orders and assumed orders, concentration camps and killing centers, and guilt and responsibility.

Words that describe human behavior often have multiple meanings. Resistance, for example, usually refers to a physical act of armed revolt. During the Holocaust, it also encompassed partisan activity; the smuggling of messages, food, and weapons; and actual military engagement. But resistance also embraced willful disobedience such as continuing to 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 remain alive in the face of abject brutality was an act of spiritual resistance.

**6. Make careful distinctions about sources of information.**

Students need practice in distinguishing among fact, opinion, and fiction; between primary and secondary sources; and among types of evidence such as court testimonies, oral histories, and other written documents. Hermeneutics—the science of interpretation—should be called into play to help guide your students in their analysis of sources. Students should be encouraged to consider why a particular text was written, who wrote it, who the intended audience was, whether there were any biases inherent in 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.

Because scholars often base their research on different bodies of information, varying interpretations of history can emerge. Consequently, all interpretations are subject to analytical evaluation. Only by refining their own “hermeneutic of suspicion” can students mature into readers who discern the difference between legitimate scholars who present competing historical interpretations and those who distort or deny historical fact for personal or political gain.

**7. Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions.**

Though all Jews were targeted for destruction by the Nazis, the experiences of all Jews were not the same. Simplistic views and stereotyping take place when groups of people are viewed as monolithic in attitudes and actions. How ethnic groups or social clusters are labeled and portrayed in school curricula has a direct impact on how students perceive groups in their daily lives. Remind your students that although members of a group may share common experiences and beliefs, generalizations about them, without benefit of modifying or qualifying terms (e.g., “sometimes,” “usually,” “in many cases but not all”) tend to stereotype group behavior and distort historical reality. Thus, all Germans cannot be characterized as Nazis nor should any nationality be reduced to a singular or one-dimensional description.

**8. Do not romanticize history to engage students’ interest.**

People who risked their lives to rescue victims of Nazi oppression provide useful, important, and compelling role models for students. However, given that only a small fraction of non-Jews under Nazi occupation helped to rescue Jews, an overemphasis on heroic tales in a unit on the Holocaust can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of the history. Similarly, in exposing students to the worst aspects of human nature as revealed in the history of the Holocaust, you run the risk of fostering cynicism in your students. Accuracy of fact along with a balanced perspective on the history must be priorities for any teacher.

**9. Contextualize the history you are teaching.**

Events of the Holocaust and, particularly, how individuals and organizations behaved at that time, should be placed in historical context. The occurrence of the Holocaust must be studied in the context of European history as a whole to give students a perspective on the precedents and circumstances that may have contributed to it.

Similarly, study of the Holocaust should be viewed within a contemporaneous context, so students can begin to comprehend the circumstances that encouraged or discouraged particular actions or events. Frame your approach to specific events and acts of complicity or defiance by considering when and where an act took place; the immediate consequences to oneself and one's family of one's actions; the impact of contemporaneous events; the degree of control the Nazis had on a country or local population; the cultural attitudes of particular native populations historically toward different victim groups; and the availability, effectiveness, and risk of potential hiding places.

Students should be reminded that individuals and groups do not always fit neatly into categories of behavior. The very same people did not always act consistently as "bystanders," "collaborators," "perpetrators," or "rescuers." Individuals and groups often behaved differently depending upon changing events and circumstances. The same person who in 1933 might have stood by and remained uninvolved while witnessing social discrimination of Jews might later have joined up with the SA and become a collaborator or have been moved to dissent vocally or act in defense of Jewish friends and neighbors.

Encourage your students not to categorize groups of people only on the basis of their experiences during the Holocaust: contextualization is critical so that victims are not perceived only as victims. The fact that Jews were the central victims of the Nazi regime should not obscure the vibrant culture and long history of Jews in Europe prior to the Nazi era. By exposing students to some of the cultural contributions and achievements of 2,000 years of European Jewish life, you help them to balance their perception of Jews as victims and to better appreciate the traumatic disruption in Jewish history caused by the Holocaust.

Similarly, students may know very little about Gypsies (Roma and Sinti) except for the negative images and derogatory descriptions promulgated by the Nazis. Students would benefit from a broader viewpoint, learning something about Gypsy history and culture as well as understanding the diverse ways of life among different Gypsy groups.

**10. Translate statistics into people.**

In any study of the Holocaust, the sheer number of victims challenges easy comprehension. You need to show that individual people—families of grandparents, parents, and children—are behind the statistics and to emphasize that within the larger historical narrative is a diversity of personal experience. Precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims, first-person accounts and memoir literature provide students with a way of making meaning out of collective numbers and give individual voices to a collective experience. Although students should be careful about overgeneralizing from first-person accounts, such as those from survivors, journalists, relief workers, bystanders, and liberators, personal accounts help students get beyond statistics and make historical events of the Holocaust more immediate and more personal.

**11. Be sensitive to appropriate written and audiovisual content.**

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

Often, too great an emphasis is placed on the victims of Nazi aggression rather than on the victimizers who forced people to make impossible choices or simply left them with no choice to make. Most students express empathy for victims of mass murder. But it is not uncommon for students to assume that the victims may have done something to justify the actions against them and, thus, to place inappropriate blame on the victims themselves.

There is also a tendency among students to glorify power, even when it is used to kill innocent people. Many teachers indicate that their students are intrigued and, in some cases, intellectually seduced by the symbols of power that pervaded Nazi propaganda (e.g., the swastika and/or Nazi flags, regalia, slogans, rituals, and music). Rather than highlight the trappings of Nazi power, you should ask your students to evaluate how such elements are used by governments (including our own) to build, protect, and mobilize a society. Students should also be encouraged to contemplate how such elements can be abused and manipulated by governments to implement and legitimize acts of terror and even genocide.

In any review of the propaganda used to promote Nazi ideology—Nazi stereotypes of targeted victim groups and the Hitler regime’s justifications for persecution and murder—you need to remind your students that just because such policies and beliefs are under discussion in class does not mean they are acceptable. Furthermore, any study of the Holocaust should attempt to portray all individuals, especially the victims and the perpetrators of violence, as human beings who are capable of moral judgment and independent decision making.

### **13. *Select appropriate learning activities.***

Word scrambles, crossword puzzles, and other gimmicky exercises tend not to encourage critical analysis but lead instead to low-level types of thinking and, in the case of Holocaust curricula, trivialize the history. When the effects of a particular activity, even when popular with you and your students, run counter to the rationale for studying the history, then that activity should not be used.

Similarly, activities that encourage students to construct models of killing centers should also be reconsidered because any assignment along this line will almost inevitably end up being simplistic, time-consuming, and tangential to the educational objectives for studying the history of the Holocaust.

Thought-provoking learning activities are preferred, but even here, there are pitfalls to avoid. In studying complex human behavior, many teachers rely upon simulation exercises meant to help students “experience” unfamiliar situations. Even when great care is taken to prepare a class for such an activity, simulating experiences from the Holocaust remains pedagogically unsound. The activity may engage students, but they often forget the purpose of the lesson and, even worse, they are left with the impression at the conclusion of the activity that they now know what it was like during the Holocaust. Holocaust survivors and eyewitnesses are among the first to indicate the grave difficulty of finding words to describe their experiences. It is virtually impossible to simulate accurately what it was like to live on a daily basis with fear, hunger, disease, unfathomable loss, and the unrelenting threat of abject brutality and death.

An additional problem with trying to simulate situations from the Holocaust is that complex events and actions are oversimplified, and students are left with a skewed view of history. Because there are numerous primary source accounts, both written and visual, as well as survivors and eyewitnesses who can describe actual choices faced and made by individuals, groups, and nations during this period, you should draw upon these resources and refrain from simulation games that lead to a trivialization of the subject matter.

Rather than use simulation activities that attempt to re-create situations from the Holocaust, teachers can, through the use of reflective writing assignments or in-class discussion, ask students to empathize with the experiences of those who lived through the Holocaust era. Students can be encouraged to explore varying aspects of human behavior such as fear, scapegoating, conflict resolution, and difficult decision making or to consider various perspectives on a particular event or historical experience.

#### **14. Reinforce the objectives of your lesson plan.**

As in all teaching situations, the opening and closing lessons are critically important. A strong opening should serve to dispel misinformation students may have prior to studying the Holocaust. It should set a reflective tone, move students from passive to active learning, indicate to students that their ideas and opinions matter, and establish that this history has multiple ramifications for them as individuals and as members of society as a whole.

Your closing lesson should encourage further examination of Holocaust history, literature, and art. A strong closing should emphasize synthesis by encouraging students to connect this history to other world events and to the world they live in today. Students should be encouraged to reflect on what they have learned and to consider what this study means to them personally and as citizens of a democracy.