

Why We Remember the Holocaust

“Memory has become a sacred duty of all people of goodwill.” Elie Wiesel

Purpose:

Students will explore why, how and what we remember. They will consider the importance of remembering the past, with specific reference to the impact of a lack of response of nations like the United States to protect human rights during the Holocaust. In addition, students will also learn about the roles of individuals and nations who stood up to oppression and inhumanity to protect human rights.

Background Content

The World and the Holocaust

The West, and the rest of the world, regarded the Nazi rise to power in 1933 with concern. However, gradually the new regime attained a certain degree of legitimacy. World-wide participation in the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, despite attempts to have them cancelled strengthened the Nazi's legitimacy. Throughout the 1930s, democratic countries heard numerous reports concerning violations of the rights of German Jewry and then of Austrian Jewry, like segregation of the Jews and dispossession of their property. These democratic countries barely protested. Most countries even closed their doors to Jews who sought to leave Germany.

Throughout the war, military matters were the top priority for the Allies, those countries at war with the Nazis. As a result, information concerning the persecution and murder of the Jews was pushed aside. Reports on what was happening in the ghettos and death camps, sometimes endangering the life of the person conveying the information, was at times regarded with disbelief. The Holocaust never became a first priority on any country's agenda. Allied leaders believed that the best way to stop the atrocities of the Nazi regime was to win the war. Furthermore, influential international figures and institutions, such as the Catholic Church, generally refrained from engaging in any unequivocal protest measures against Nazi Germany. Even when the magnitude of the atrocities at Auschwitz became clear the Allies did not bomb the camps. There were, nevertheless, cases in which diplomatic intervention by other countries - especially the United States - prevented the murder of many Jews. This occurred, for example, in Romania and Hungary.

During the Holocaust, the Allies - headed by Great Britain, the USSR, and the United States - were chiefly preoccupied with the strategic developments of the war. Throughout 1940 and 1941, the British waged the war alone against the Nazis. From the summer of 1941, the USSR was subjected to an existential threat by the

Nazis, when millions of its citizens – Jewish and non-Jewish – were murdered. Even when reports concerning the murder of the Jews started to surface, the Allies tended to respond with the assumption that the problem would be solved with the ultimate defeat of Nazi Germany. In practice, no Allied military initiatives were taken to prevent or delay the extermination. However, diplomatic initiatives chiefly by the United States and pressure exerted on Germany's satellite states or allies, such as Romania and Hungary, did delay and even prevented the annihilation of many Jews.

In fact, the persecution, segregation and murder of European Jewry, perpetrated during the turbulent years of WWII, was shunted to the sidelines of international attention and even concealed. Rumors and initial reports of mass murders in the USSR, some of them received through the decoding of German wireless transmissions, were initially met with apathy and even disbelief. By the summer of 1942, there were already reports of the extermination process (including on the BBC). The absence of any historical precedent as to the scope and nature of Nazi crimes made it harder for western countries to translate the reports into a comprehensive understanding of what was happening and therefore to react accordingly.

The Nazis carefully concealed and camouflaged the murders. From June 1942 and onwards, the flow of information regarding the mass murders intensified. In October, the Jewish Agency released a statement about the mass murders. On December 17, 1942, after the Polish underground managed to convey information to the west about what was happening in the extermination camps in Poland, the Allies issued a joint statement denouncing the murder of the Jews and stating that those responsible would be brought to justice. By then, the vast majority of Polish Jews were no longer among the living. Despite the statement, however, no direct military action was taken to stop the murders.

News of the mass deportation of Hungarian Jewry to Auschwitz and their murder there in 1944 did not substantially change the Allies' policies in this regard either. Nevertheless, pressures exerted on the Hungarian administration by the United States resulted in the suspension of the deportations saving many Jews.

Modified from Yad Vashem: [*The World and the Holocaust*](#)

Resources

[Why We Remember-USHMM\(video\)](#)

[American Response to the Holocaust\(video\)](#)

[American Responses\(reading\)](#)

[The World and the Holocaust](#)

[Animated Map-Rescue USHMM](#)

[Agnes Mandl Adachi is rescued by Raoul Wallenberg\(video\)](#)

[Preben Munch-Nielsen and Danish Rescue](#)

[QFT strategy](#)

[Anchor Charts](#)

Classroom Setup:

Student journals, chromebooks or laptops, access to internet, poster paper for brainstorming

Part I.

As an introduction, students are given a brief background - either orally by the teacher or with the one page description provided - and reminder of what the Holocaust was. They are then asked to brainstorm about why we want to remember this event.

The Holocaust, 1933-1945

The Holocaust Memorial Museum defines the Holocaust as a

... the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Holocaust is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." 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.

As a result of this ideology, the Germans in their attempt to purify their country and the continent, killed nearly two of every three European Jews. In addition, many others were targeted by the Nazis and persecuted including political opponents, religious dissidents as well as physically disabled patients.

The Nazis moved the Jewish population to specific areas in cities which became known as ghettos. They deported millions of Jews, and other targeted populations like Gypsies, from Germany to occupied territories where they were placed in forced labor camps and death camps. More than 6 million European Jews were killed in the camps.

Before the war began in 1939, thousands of Jewish families emigrated to other countries in Europe. However, once the Germans occupied these nations, they killed a majority of these refugees.

The US feared too many refugees entering the country during the Great Depression and only allowed a small number of refugees into America between 1938 and 1939.

After the war began however, refugees who wanted to come to the United States were turned away. After the war, hundreds of thousands of survivors of the war went to displaced persons camps that were administered by the UNRRA (the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) under the supervision of the American and British occupying forces. Of the approx. 250,000 Displaced Person's, somewhere between 1/2 and 2/3 went to Israel with the remainder settling in the United States, South America, and Australia.

Thousands emigrated to South America, the US, and the newly created state of Israel.

Modified from: "[Introduction to the Holocaust.](https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143)" [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.](https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143)
[United States Holocaust Memorial Council](https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143)
<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143>

1) Have students brainstorm in groups in a [QFT exercise](#) about “why human beings remember.” This format allows all students to participate and develop their skills at questioning.

- Ask as many questions as possible
 - Have one person record the answers on a big sheet of paper
 - Categorize the questions as closed or open ended.
 - Choose 3 questions that will best help us to understand why we remember the Holocaust
- Record observations in their journal.**
- **Have students share their best question and record their questions.**

2) Have students view the 9 minute video from the Holocaust Museum site: [“Why We Remember.”](#) While they watch, they can add questions to their list of why we remember.

After the video, the class can discuss the questions they chose and record possible answers. In addition, the following question can be answered in their journals:

- How can these remembrances help us understand our global world today?

Part II

One way Americans remember World War II is that it was a “good war” because the U.S. helped to save the Jews. In this section, students will consider how the Americans responded to the Holocaust and how European countries and

individuals responded. In this section, students will learn that the story is more complex than any simple statement. They will have the chance to evaluate the role the US played and consider the role that European governments and individuals made to save lives. Students should be reminded of the compelling question, “*what is it that makes us human?*” and “*How do we insure the humanity of others?*”

1) Have students view the 17 minute video on the [Confronting the Holocaust: the American Response](#) which raises challenging questions about the U.S. response. Fill in the chart below to record responses - or lack of response - by the U.S. Government and by individuals.

2) Then have students view the 5 minute Animated Map of Rescue and listen to the oral testimonies of two survivors who were rescued. ([Animated Map-Rescue-USHMM](#), [Agnes Mandl Adachi is rescued by Raoul Wallenberg \(2 minutes\)](#), [Preben Munch-Nielsen and Danish Rescue \(1 minute\)](#)).

Activity

Chart the response of the US as well as some of the European nations mentioned in the video. Who helped rescue Jewish refugees? Why? Why did other nations not get involved?

Source	Which country?	Rescue Policy? Roadblocks to goal?	Rationale?
American Response to the Holocaust-USHMM			
The St. Louis			
Legislative Branch: The Rescue Resolution			

Executive Branch: Treasury Department The War Refugee Board			
Executive Branch: State Department			
President Roosevelt • Hungary			
Animated Map of Rescue			
Denmark			
Le Chambon-sur-Lignon			

Varian Fry			
Jan Karski			
Raoul Wallenberg			
Individual Actions			
Agnes Adachi			
Preben Munch-Nielsen			

3) Have students focus on one of the 12 responses listed in the chart. Students in their groups will create [anchor charts](#) about one source. These charts should include the most relevant and important information laid out clearly so that others can learn from them.

Have students read each other's charts. Pick the charts that are the clearest and post them in the classroom as a place for students to reference for information. Have

students think about who would be their enemy and who would be their ally.

Students should use the information on their charts to answer the following questions about helping those who were victims of Nazi atrocities in their group and in their journals:

- Why is it important to remember those who stood up to Nazi oppression?
- What are the implications for apathy and indifference in the face of genocide?
- How does this relate to world events today?
- How does this relate to events in your daily life?

Assessment:

- What is our responsibility as a nation or as individuals when confronted with genocide and oppression?
- What motivates people to act?
- What action would you be most likely to take and why?

Civic Engagement

- Plan a Day of Remembrance for your classroom, other 10th , 11th and 12th graders, your school, and/or your community. What would you remember and why? Put on the Day of Remembrance in late April or early May once you know the date [Remembrance Day Calendar](#)
- See also this link for other suggestions on how to plan events: [Organizing A Day of Remembrance](#)