

## Teaching the Holocaust as Contemporary and Contextualized Lesson

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to contextualize the lessons of the Holocaust by suggesting effective teaching strategies. Without diminishing the suffering and magnitude of the Holocaust, its lessons need to be carried to a broader audience. But how can a non-Jewish audience not only empathize, but also understand? First, by studying the Holocaust, we are able to apply the mechanisms to other genocides. Second, by incorporating Jewish life and traditions into the psychology of the Nazis, we are beginning to see how millions of Jews were tricked. Finally, by applying the principles of discrimination to contemporary situations, we see the effectiveness of voting redistricting, jury selection, and marriage (un-)equality.

Effective teaching engages the student. The challenge is to develop teaching strategies without losing sight of the Holocaust. Key element will be the integration of Jewish customs, holidays, humor, and thought into the historical curriculum. This article offers a pedagogic road map, including best practice, teaching the Holocaust as a contextualized and contemporary lesson to a college aged, non-Jewish learner.

**Key words:** Jewish studies, Holocaust studies, history, German history

### 1. Introduction

Although the Holocaust is taught in various school districts, students retain very little knowledge, nor can they apply it to current situations. I teach a fully enrolled introductory Holocaust course at the college level. This course is part of a Jewish Study minor, but it is also listed as a general education course, fulfilling a mandatory diversity requirement. The student population is very diverse ethnically and academically. In the Spring 2013, 41% of the campus wide student population were identified as minorities. The class size maximum in the Holocaust course is set at 35 students and the course regularly fills up. Approximately 50% of the student population in the course is African-American. Rarely does a Jewish student, or a student who is minimally knowledgeable about Judaism, sign up for this class. I am versed in learner centered teaching methods, but given the class size and the different levels of educational backgrounds of the students, I prefer a guided instructor focused teaching strategy.

Teaching the Holocaust is an intensely personal experience for teacher and student alike, and instructors must find materials and a teaching style that suit them best. Consequently, this paper is not a lesson plan; it should rather function as a road map to contextualize the Holocaust by bringing it to life for a diverse, mostly uninformed group of students who are fulfilling a general educational course requirement. Although the Holocaust is at the core of this learning experience, a considerable amount of time is dedicated to the period before 1933, and the

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historical relevancy post 1945. Each instructor should determine content and learning goals at the beginning of the course. For most students, the Holocaust course will remain the only exposure to anything Jewish. At the risk of sacrificing time from the Holocaust proper, this course can offer a unique opportunity to interweave the celebration of Jewish holidays, a historical background analysis of anti-Semitism, the Jewish Diaspora, and Jewish culture or *Yiddishkeit*.

A rich body of research about Holocaust Education has been created. Eyewitnesses and their testimony provide the most authentic pedagogic representation of the Holocaust (Lisa Reid). Scholars, such as Kate Kessler, David Lindquist, Paul Lyons, Jeffrey Glanz, Alexander Karn, among many others have developed pedagogical strategies and discussions for the successful teaching of the Holocaust on all educational levels. Several interdisciplinary approaches, such as Facing History and Ourselves, provide valuable lessons in regard to anti-Semitism, racism and patterns of discrimination. Moreover, the internet offers a multitude of excellent interactive sites and resources. Any exploration about teaching the Holocaust can begin with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's resources for educators: [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), followed by "A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust": <http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/website.htm>. The "Introduction for Teachers" by the University of Michigan provides a detailed 18 lesson plan with discussion topics, learning goals, objectives and key glossaries. The International School for Holocaust Studies at YadVashem offers an online course experience.

The main objective of my course is to study the methods of oppression in order to identify them in any historical situation, past or current. Students must be able to apply and contextualize the lessons of the Holocaust. This project takes almost six weeks of guided research, writing, and editing. At the end of the semester, the student has to produce a five page research paper, applying the mechanisms of the Holocaust to any other genocide. Topics can range from the established genocides in Armenia, Rwanda, Cambodia, Sudan, and Yugoslavia, to Christian crusades, the Irish Potato Famine, Mali, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, La Guerra Sucia of Argentina and Chile, the Ukrainian Holodomor of 1932, or the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The pedagogical challenge is not to lose sight of the Holocaust, its magnitude, organization, execution, and effectiveness, while establishing historical parallels.

## **2. The First Lesson**

The first lesson is crucial in establishing a classroom climate that will be respectful, serious, and conducive to learning. In a consumer based education model, an effective instruction should create enough interest in the very first lesson, in order for students not "to shop and drop". After a general introduction, I discuss the syllabus thoroughly, as it has become a legal document. The syllabus includes the current Jewish year, in addition to the Gregorian year. Following, I divide the class into groups with the task to list prejudice, stereotypes, and negatives about Jews. Very few students offer more than: bankers, stingy, cheap. It seems that the Generation Y operates in a more accepting and tolerant, but also a more multiethnic world. Each student response paper is passed through several groups in order to ensure anonymity of the comments. We collect the comments on the board and group them into social, financial, traditional, popular categories. Without offering any explanation, I will point out that we will investigate the origin of these stereotypes during the semester. With this exercise, I create an open classroom climate, in which students get to know each other and begin to work together in a non-threatening, collaborative classroom. The exercise serves as an icebreaker, and introduces students to the mechanisms of discrimination. Students need to understand that the origin of prejudice and hatred lies in a grey space between

ignorance and full knowledge. A discussion about lesser known ethnic groups in the United States, such as Turks, Ethiopians, or Iranians might follow. Most students will be ignorant and hence will not harbor any prejudice about these lesser known minority groups. The same question related to Hispanics will yield a different outcome, and students who are Hispanic will again not harbor any prejudice against themselves. I ask students to share a Polish joke. I will then tell my students that I am half Polish and therefore did not laugh. Students will learn that the grey area of having a little knowledge is the dangerous space where prejudices are born.

A second classroom activity introduces technology. Throughout the semester I use different forms of technology in the classroom: DVD, audio, computer internet. It makes sense to start learning visually as early as possible. Although I still use the textbook *Holocaust: A History*, knowing that most students will not, or cannot process information in book form, important information has to be transmitted through a medium that reflects the learning habits of the students: the computer. Not only do I use the computer, I also introduce a music video on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). The song I chose is "I gotta feelin'" by the Black Eyed Peas. We listen to the song and most students are familiar with the melody, if not the lyrics. After the song, I ask the students: "who would have been gassed by the Nazis?" The students become quiet and reflective. I point out that drug users, homosexuals and lesbians, as well as Afro-Germans would have been interned in concentration camps. The pedagogical goal of the video is to introduce the different Nazi concentration camp populations, in order to create a diversified image with which some students might be able to empathize more deeply.

### **3. Ending with a Bang**

It is essential for students to understand the complexity of history. Whose story is it? Who writes it? Who reads it? And whose facts are chosen or omitted? The minority group never gets to tell their story, nor do the Jews. In a dramatic way, I introduce the concept of theology, philosophy, critical thinking and religion. Majorities rarely think about minorities, nor do they know much about the "little" other. Minorities, however, are usually familiar and knowledgeable about the hegemonic culture that surrounds them, as it might ensure their survival. Consequently, in class we look at Christianity from an analytical point, an analysis that is seldom undertaken by the orthodox believer of a particular religion. I point out that Judaism had already been established for over 2000 years (the Jewish year is on my syllabus), that Jesus was Jewish, illegitimate, uneducated, and that he was not a part of the ruling theocracy. It is also appropriate to introduce Lilith versus Eve, a juxtaposition of virgin versus whore, as fundamental gender principle within the Judeo-Christian culture. To widen the critical view of religious texts, such as the Bible, I point out that Eve was the only woman in the Garden of Eden. Incest is the inevitable consequence of Biblical history, read literally. Not only will students learn more about Judaism, they will also think critically about Christianity.

### **4. Expand the Parameters beyond 1933-1945**

Students might have heard of the term Third Reich, or they might even be familiar with the historical dates of the Third Reich. Since there was a Third Reich, there must have been a First and a Second Reich. This simple logical exercise is the justification for an extensive, historical excursion. In order to begin to understand Jewish life, traditions and thinking, we begin in the beginning: in today's Iraq, the cradle of Western civilization. This approach is important since the USA is currently at war with Iraq and some returning veterans will be able to illustrate and personalize this part of history. Nevertheless, we quickly move to Canaan, the concept of Israel, and

the right of that nation to exist. History and the invasions of the Assyrians, Babylonians and eventually the Romans with the respective dates lead to the Jewish Diaspora. The Bible serves as a moral imperative for Jews not to accept another god after the mistake of the Golden Calf. The appropriate Google maps illustrate flourishing Jewish life around the Mediterranean. Special emphasis can be put on pre-Inquisition Andalusia and the coexistence of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Additional reading about Maimonides can be a part of the course, or can serve as extra credit.

Until the Inquisition, Jewish life was not much different from most other civilizations: nomadic, survival, series of invasions with the loss of territory but never Jewish identity. The Diaspora has forced Jewish life into homes and away from a specific geographic center, unlike Catholicism or Islam. The pattern of a thriving Jewish life juxtaposed with the complete persecution of any Jewish life is written into world history as of 1492. Depending on the composition of the class, anti-Semitic texts from Spain, France, or Portugal could be introduced. The question why Cristobal Colon left Spain in exactly 1492 might lead to interesting discussions that could include the “discovery of America”. With the help of topographic maps of Europe, the Diaspora paves the way to Jewish settlements and shtetl life in Poland and Eastern Europe.

## **5. First and Second Reich as Historical Context of Anti-semitism**

This segment of the course turns the historical clock back to 800AD and the coronation of Charlemagne, coincidentally, the beginning of Germany and France. Since 842 and the Strasbourg Oaths, the borders between Germany and France had been defined. The eastwards expansion of Germany in the 11–12th centuries, the foundation of German settlements in Poland, as well as the permeable nature of Germany’s eastern border are important history lessons that determined Jewish life tremendously.

The first step of anti-Semitism begins with the foundation of the cities, the exclusion of Jews from the rising guilds, the creation of Jewish ghettos within medieval cities, as well as the fact that Jews were not permitted to own land. In a dramatic show-down, students must understand that Jews did not want to be bankers, musicians, scientists, etc but that they had no other option but to resort to “typically” Jewish professions. If you can’t own your own field or work with your own hands, Jews had to pick professions that were not forbidden. The fact that Christians were not permitted to conduct financial transactions put the Jews in a prominent and eventually affluent position. It is worth to repeat this fact throughout the course. Restrictive clothing, the rise of the Jewish classes during the Middle Ages through money lending and financing armies of the leading rulers, can also be part of a constructive lesson.

Before the end of the First Reich, students must understand the importance of the French Revolution and the following emancipation of the Jews in 1791. The crossing of the river Rhine marks the end of the First Reich but opens the doors in Germany for the emancipation of the German Jews in 1812. These historical dates, as well as their context, are crucial in understanding the Holocaust.

Depending on preference, composition of learners in the classroom, and goals of teaching European history, the period between 1805 till 1870 does not need to be discussed in depth with the exception of the Vienna Congress of 1815, setting the stage for the rise of Prussia and the beginning of the Second Reich. The debate in Frankfurt concerning the future of Germany in 1848 is equally essential in helping students understand the values of social, ethnic, religious, and linguistic purity and homogeneity. In 1848, German delegates in Frankfurt voted in favor of an ethnically pure, but smaller territorial Germany (*Kleindeutsche/Großdeutsche Lösung*), against an

expansion to the Balkans. Crucial pedagogic points not to be missed: the quick and successful submission of France, the humiliating proclamation of the Second Reich in Versailles, and the social accomplishments in Germany during the German Empire. The lack of a fair hearing and due process at court for Jews becomes evident with Alfred Dreyfus. Theodor Herzl's claim for an independent Jewish state and Zionism are obvious teaching goals.

I introduce the concept of the pendulum to illustrate the rapid and drastic changes, particularly for Jews. Being emancipated in 1812, German Jews had reached upper middle and upper class ranks in a short period. The moral attitude of the *Spiessbürger* mirrored the views of the conservative Jewish community and allowed for an easier transition into gentile German life. A brief overview of the social advances in Germany, such as free hospital care, free schools and no university tuition, retirement benefits and workman's compensation during the Empire invite a critical comparison to the United States and the tuition bills of the students.

Several approaches are possible to discuss World War I. Without taking time away from the Holocaust, I do not discuss battle or military history or dates. It might be useful to introduce the fact of mass killings, chemical warfare and a pre-WWI euphoria, which had found their way into German Expressionism. The historical events after WW I are more important and deserve a deeper discussion.

I return to the pendulum as a basic movement in Western history. The higher it swings to the right, the more pronounced the countermovement to the left will be. Germany had declared victory over France in Versailles, hence France dictated a humiliating and economically crippling Versailles Treaty. Among the demoralizing aspects of losing WW I for Germany was the stationing of French soldiers of African origin in the Rhineland. A self proclaimed ethnically and linguistically pure Germany was deeply perturbed by the placement of Africans on German soil. Along with the loss of territory, identity, colonies and industries in Germany, came an unwanted political model: democracy. France had forced Germany to change her political system and therefore the Weimar Republic was born. The diversity and richness of the *Gründerzeit* (Founder Epoch) becomes evident in the *Weimar* Constitution. The cultural accomplishments, such as German Expressionistic art and literature, *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art), the Magnus Hirschfeld Institute, as well as Schiller's and Goethe's Weimar are juxtaposed with the Buchenwald concentration camp. Jews were perceived to have had a prominent part in the Sodom and Gomorrah of legalized prostitution, homosexuality, drugs and economic decay of post-WW I. This liberal culture had been superimposed onto a deeply religious and conservative German Gentile, who was to associate the Jew as the root of all German evil. The Great Depression of 1929 added the necessary impetus that accelerated the rise of the Nazis.

## 6. The Actual Holocaust 1933-1945

Parallel to the three Reichs in German history, it is possible to subdivide the Holocaust into three periods:

(1) 30 January 1933 – Kristallnacht (9 November 1938): passing of laws.

At the core of this segment are the Nürnberg Laws. Parallels to anti-miscegenation laws in the United States are apparent. Moreover, a recent video on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTaJScb1neU) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTaJScb1neU>), aired originally by AlJazeera, brings racial discrimination into the America classroom. Marriage Equality, DOMA and "Don't ask, don't tell" question the rights of gay and lesbian US citizens. Videos such as the song: "You got to be carefully taught" from the WW II musical SOUTH PACIFIC, or the Video "Define Me" (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mobile>) by Ryan Amador "Define Me", directed by Tom Gustafson, bring current

topics into the classroom.

(2) Kristallnacht — 20 January 1942 (Wannsee Conference): period of ghettoization.

This period can be summarized by the ghettoization of Jews and Hitler's resettlement policy. A discussion concerning African-American ghettos in the United States and Jewish ghettos in Europe will yield noteworthy commonalities, such as the value of the ghetto with its homogeneity, celebration and observation of traditions and language, as well as the historical fact that Jews had been accustomed to living in ghettos in European cities since the Middle Ages. Both groups share political and economic discrimination.

(3) Final Solution

In order to introduce the mass killings and gassings of Jews in Europe, it is worth to revisit the *Nürnberg* Laws and the *Law for the Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases* and the *Law Against Dangerous Habitual Criminals*, or cripple laws. First, students have to understand the process of dehumanization applied by the Nazis. One can open the discussion by asking: what is the difference between a baby and a puppy? Ethics applies to the baby but not the puppy, hence, we can put the puppy to sleep but not the baby. Second, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution will make students understand the need for natural selection. Similar to a herd of animals, it is the young and the strong that survive. The weakest animals will be eaten by predators. Third, a broader philosophical discussion can lead to Friedrich Nietzsche and his idea of the *Übermensch*. Such thinking will allow students to follow the gradual process of dehumanization applied by the Nazis.

It is best to teach the actual gassings by focusing on mobile T4 units, their location, purpose and the mechanism. Students will learn that the basic protocol, from bathhouse to gassing and disposing of the corpses, was basically established by 1941, prior to any gassings in concentration camps. The need for *Lebensraum* and the eastward expansion, combined with the homecoming of ethnic Germans from Eastern Prussia and territories outside the agreed upon map with Stalin, lead, almost inevitably, to the Final Solution. The number of returning Germans, the escalating number of Jews, combined with a stagnant war in the East, are decisive factors that contributed to the Holocaust. Hitler encountered about 200,000 well as assimilated, educated, affluent German Jews at the beginning of his political appointment. This number had grown to almost 8 Million Jews after the rapid and aggressive eastern expansion. Rather than killing Jews at first, Hitler wanted to get rid of them: Madagascar was a possibility. But in the East, not only had the number of Jews multiplied, but also the caliber of Jew. Untouched by invasive gentile traditions or ways of life, Jewish communities, shtetls, had begun to exist since the Inquisition. Lack of population and poor living conditions allowed those Jewish communities to thrive, albeit in an isolated, economically stagnant way. Because of their traditional way of life and dress, the Nazis used the stereotypical *Ostjude* in their propaganda to describe all Jews.

## 7. Concentration Camps

Rather than discussing all concentration camps, it is best to establish subcategories. The website [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) provides an excellent summary. Students learn that none of the camps had been planned thoroughly and that the Nazis, almost out of panic, erected them. Consequently, each camp has a different origin, purpose, and significance. First, I subcategorize concentration camps into: transit camp, labor camp, and extermination camp. I use Dachau and Ravensbrück as examples for labor camps. Dachau was set aside for Gypsies, Homosexuals, and Afro-Germans. Ravensbrück was the camp for women. Theresienstadt serves as example for a transit camp. Concerning extermination camps, I focus on the first generation of camps, Operation

Reinhard: Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka. Their location and the number of bodies exterminated are essential, as well as presenting the different groups that built the different concentration camps. Auschwitz occupies two weeks of class discussion and explanation. The location, the subdivisions into Auschwitz, Birkenau and IG Farben, its origin and original purpose, as well as the magnitude, provide ample material for an individualized approach to the Holocaust. Websites, testimonies, historical data, and photos, including the liberation, are compelling witnesses and should be used to destroy any doubts about the magnitude of the Holocaust. Josef Mengele's twin studies can be a part of the Auschwitz segment. This discussion can lead into fundamentals of Judaism: are we born Jewish, or do we learn Jewish behavior? Mengele's studies focused on the question whether Jewishness is based on genetics or behavior. The same question seems to be prevalent concerning homosexuality. Fundamental Christians, who ignore the facts of Evolution, claim that homosexuality is behavioral rather than genetic.

Obviously, there is not one single cause that made the Holocaust possible. Instructors, who are comfortable in their *Yiddishkeit*, might comment on the significance of guilt and suffering for the Jewish people in a post-Auschwitz discussion. The fact remains that the Nazis tricked innocent Jews into providing false Jewish cultural signifiers: the *Judenrat* of the Eastern ghettos mimicked the idea of the minyan, the ghetto provided cultural similarity to the shtetl, and the shower facilities evoked the mikvah. Finally, the shaving of the hair was not alien to some Orthodox females who shave their heads, in order to be more comfortable under a sheitel or scarf.

## 8. The End

There is no climax after Auschwitz, and yet not only is there life after Auschwitz, but also poetry. A final segment of the Holocaust might include a presentation of the different resistance movements and the concept of the righteous gentile. "Schindler's List" is a popular example. Hollywood's "Holocaust Industry" has provided additional visual presentations that are readily available for the students and make for excellent written or extra credit assignments.

Time permitting, the course might end with a review of the Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences and the post WW II period, such as the four occupied zones in post-Nazi Germany, the Berlin Airlift, the separation and reunification of the two Germanys. Again, parallels to current Iraq will force students to think critically about the significance of political decisions.

## 9. Integrating the Jewish Holidays into the Curriculum?

Teaching the Holocaust provides an excellent opportunity to share Jewish holidays and traditions with students. It is an individual decision, whether Jewish holidays are a part of the course, are observed in class, or class is cancelled. Based on the Jewish Year, spring and fall semesters are sharply divided. While the spring offers a chance to observe Purim, and Passover, it is the fall that brings the Jewish High Holidays. These holidays allow for a rare opportunity in a Holocaust course to laugh and celebrate with funny websites such as: "Let my People Grow" (available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fubCYOXRrhQ>), "Who Let the Jews Out" (available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=fvwrrel&v=4t7a66vbrN0>), and "Matzo Man" (available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imOHHGk90KY>) for Passover.

For Rosh Hashanah the "Rosh Hashanah Rock Anthem" (available online at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T\\_M5-qthA8w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_M5-qthA8w)) shows that Jews rock, and is a real success with the students.

Yom Kippur and KolNidre: If these holidays are observed in class, it would be most appropriate to wear white and not leather. The students must be made aware of the importance of Yom Kippur. A mock KolNidre introduction can be done in 50 minutes or 1:15 minutes. A cello rendition of KolNidre by Max Bruch opus 47 is a dignified beginning of the lesson, followed by a brief explanation of Teshuva and a video of Vidui which laid the foundation for the Christian “Our Father”. Websites such as [www.ou.org/torah/tt/5763/haazinu63/vidui.htm](http://www.ou.org/torah/tt/5763/haazinu63/vidui.htm) bring Jewish liturgy to life. In order to understand the concept of sin and redemption combined with the idea of self-meditation, I choose a controversial rendition of AvinuMalkenu. During the video students can reflect on their own sins, rather than passing judgment. In order to create a KolNidre atmosphere, students must leave the classroom without speaking after the video “AvinuMalkenu Remix & Mantrana works”. Students can also keep a diary of sinning during the 10 days of Awe.

**Summary:** the Holocaust is an intensively moving experience for student and teacher. Without undermining the importance of the Holocaust, the mechanisms of suppression can be applied to similar historical situations. A holistic pedagogic approach that combines Jewish culture, tradition, theology and history allows the student, in a compassionate way, to internalize the message of the Holocaust: Never Again.

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