

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR STUDYING THE HOLOCAUST

TARGET AUDIENCE: GRADES 8-12

ESTIMATED TIME OF LESSON: 90 MINUTES (TWO 45 MINUTE LESSONS)

STUDENT OUTCOMES

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to...

- Identify prior knowledge about the Holocaust and the sources of that knowledge.
- Define “Holocaust” and “genocide” and compare several definitions of the Holocaust.
- Distinguish between primary and secondary source material and explain why each is important when studying historical events.
- Reflect on visual history testimony from Jewish survivors and others who witnessed the Holocaust.
- Explain why it is important to study the Holocaust and instances of mass atrocity and genocide..

ALIGNED STANDARDS (CALIFORNIA COMMON CORE)

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.8.2, 9-10.2, 11-12.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.8.6, 9-10.6, 11-12.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.1, 9-10.1, 11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.2, 9-10.2, 11-12.2
- CCSS.ELA.SL.8.1, 9-10.1, 11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA.SL.8.2, 9-10.2, 11-12.2
- Standard 10.8.5: Students must analyze the Nazi policy of pursuing “racial purity,” its transformation into the “Final Solution,” and the resulting Holocaust that murdered six million Jewish civilians. [1, 2]

ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

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CONTEXT:

This lesson introduces students to the Holocaust by front-loading vocabulary for studying the Holocaust and establishing a rationale for the importance of learning about instances of mass atrocity and genocide. Students explore the value of examining different types of source material when studying the Holocaust, with a special emphasis on visual history testimony.

GLOSSARY:

List the key academic vocabulary students need to know up front in order to understand and engage in this lesson. You may also include a longer list at the end of the lesson, if needed.

- **Concentration camp:** Camps established by the Nazi regime, which eventually became a major instrument of terror, control, punishment, and killing performed through both deliberate means as well as attrition by hunger and/or disease.
- **European Jewry:** Over 9.5 million European (including the Soviet Union) Jews in the pre-World War II period. By 1948, there were only an estimated 3.7 million Jews remaining in Europe.
- **Genocide:** The United Nations defines genocide as any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, including killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about a physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.
- **Holocaust:** The murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators. Sinti-Roma, Poles, people with physical and mental disabilities, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents were also targeted by the Nazis.
- **Holocaust denial and distortion:** An antisemitic belief that the Holocaust never happened or that minimizes or trivializes it.
- **Ideology:** A set of beliefs, opinions, and values held by an individual or a group.
- **Jehovah's Witness:** A Christian denomination that originated in the United States and had about 20,000 members in Germany in 1933. Their religious beliefs did not allow them to swear allegiance to any worldly power, making them enemies in the eyes of the Nazi state.
- **liberator/liberation:** The process of one army driving an occupying army out of an occupied territory. Holocaust survivors and citizens of occupied Europe used the word "liberation" to refer to the moment they were freed from Nazi control. Individuals and/or nations involved in the liberation are referred to as "liberators."
- **Nazi:** Short for Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter-Partei (N.S.D.A.P.), the German national socialist political party that emerged in Munich after World War I. The party was taken over by Adolf Hitler in the early 1920s. The swastika was the party symbol.
- **Persecution:** Unfair or abusive treatment of an individual or group over a period of time; a campaign to subjugate, expel, or exterminate a group of people based on their religion, race, ethnicity, or other aspect of their identity.
- **Roma:** The umbrella term 'Roma' includes different related groups, including Roma, Sinti, and numerous others diverse in culture and lifestyles. The Roma communities have lived predominantly in Eastern Europe since the 15th century and their origin is traced to India. They shared a common language, culture, and until the twentieth century, a wandering way of life. "Gypsies" was a collective term often used for Roma and similar communities. The term is considered offensive due to its association with damaging stereotypes, including poverty and dishonesty. Roma people were considered asocial elements by the Nazis and persecuted

relentlessly. An estimated 1 to 1.5 million members of this minority lived across Europe before the war. Between 250,000 and 500,000 Roma were killed by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during the war.

- **Shoah:** A Hebrew word meaning “catastrophe,” referring to the Holocaust.
- **Sinti:** Sinti is the name of a nomadic people of northwestern Europe, related to the Roma people. Roma people were considered asocial elements by the Nazis and persecuted relentlessly. An estimated 1 to 1.5 million members of this minority lived across Europe before the war. Between 250,000 and 500,000 Roma were killed by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during the war. (See also Roma)
- **Survivor:** Within the context of the Holocaust, a survivor is someone who escaped death at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators.
- **Visual History Testimony:** As defined by USC Shoah Foundation, visual history testimony is a videotaped account of one person’s experiences of life before, during, and after the Holocaust. Visual history testimony offers a deeper understanding of these events as they were lived, filtered through the reflections of one person.

MATERIALS:

General Materials:

- [Testimony Reflections Handout](#)

Lesson One:

- [Roman Kent Biography](#)
- [Roman Kent Testimony](#)
- [Leon Bass Biography](#)
- [Leon Bass Testimony](#)
- [Learn and Confirm Chart](#)

Lesson Two:

- [Holocaust Definitions](#)
 - [Holocaust Definitions: Sorting It Out](#)
 - [Genocide Definition](#)
 - [What was the Holocaust? \(Alternate option\)](#)
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DIFFERENTIATION

- Videos are short and designed to be played multiple times to assist with student understanding. Captions can be engaged as an additional strategy.
- The lesson includes audio-visual testimony, images and text. Instead of exploring each piece as a whole class, students can also be split into groups with assets assigned to align with students’ preferred learning style. Students can share out to class or jigsaw content to further whole class understanding.
- These materials are also available in Spanish by toggling the globe at the top of [the unit page](#).

ASSESSMENT(S):

- Formative Assessments
 - Class Discussions
 - Small Group Discussions
 - [Holocaust Definitions: Sorting It Out](#)
 - Features of Antisemitism Graphic Organizer Activity
 - The Through Lines of Antisemitism Activity
- Summative Assessments
 - As a summative task, students identify three reasons why the Holocaust is an important historical topic or time period to study, and write them on individual index cards. They are encouraged to think specifically about the persecution of Jewish people and also make connections to other examples of injustice. Students' cards can be collected to check for understanding of lesson concept.
 - As a follow-up to this lesson, students work in small groups to sort and synthesize the reasons they identified in the summative task until they come up with a manageable list. Their reasons are written on a class chart, which is posted prominently and serves as a rationale for the class' study of the Holocaust



I: BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR STUDYING THE HOLOCAUST

TARGET AUDIENCE: GRADES 8-12

ESTIMATED TIME OF LESSON: 45 MINUTES

PROCEDURES

In this lesson, students identify what they know and want to learn about the Holocaust, and distinguish between primary and secondary sources of information. They compare different definitions of the Holocaust and begin to develop a vocabulary for discussing this subject matter. Students are introduced to visual history testimony as an important source of learning about the Holocaust, and view testimonies that develop their understanding of why this is a critical topic of study.

1 Students learn that they will embark upon a study of the Holocaust. They are introduced to the Testimony Reflections Handout, found at the beginning of this unit, and learn that visual history testimonies of people who survived and bore witness to the Holocaust will be a core aspect of their investigation.

2 Students watch testimony clips from individuals – a Jewish survivor and a liberator – who share their personal reasons for giving testimony and educating about the Holocaust. Prior to sharing the teacher shares the bios of both speakers: [Roman Kent Biography](#) & [Leon Bass Biography](#). As they watch the clips ([Roman Kent Testimony](#) & [Leon Bass Testimony](#)), students take notes on the [Testimony Reflections Handout](#). After viewing the testimony clips, students journal and/or participate in a whole group discussion in response to some of the following questions:

- What emotions did Roman Kent and Leon Bass exhibit as they described their reasons for speaking out about the Holocaust and against bigotry? What feelings did they stir in you?
- What motivations do you think these two men share? What might a survivor of the Holocaust from Poland and a Black man from Philadelphia have in common?
- How do you think Leon’s experience of racism at home (including serving in a segregated military) shaped the way he viewed antisemitism abroad?
- What examples of what Leon calls “the evil” do you see in your community or the wider world today? Based on Leon’s and Roman’s comments and your own experiences, what are the keys to fighting this “evil”?
- What examples can you provide to demonstrate Roman’s claim that even in the midst of atrocities there is goodness? How did it make you feel when he said, “You have the right to be good, you should be good”?
- Based on these testimonies and your own prior knowledge, why do you think the Holocaust is an important topic for us to study?

3 The following prompt is posted on the board: “Roman Kent described the Holocaust as ‘the atrocities which happened...because...the world stood by and did nothing.’ What do you actually know about the Holocaust?” In small groups, students discuss and record (on large chart paper) what they now know about the Holocaust, their sources of information, and what they want to learn during their study of the Holocaust. When they are done, groups post their charts and take a brief “gallery walk” in order to see what their classmates have noted. The class discusses any key observations or items that require immediate clarification. Students’ notes can be added to this [Learn and Confirm Chart](#) and used as a tool to help them track ongoing learning throughout their study of the Holocaust.

4 The class discusses the following questions: “How would you categorize the sources listed on the charts? What are the different types of sources?” The distinction between primary and secondary sources is highlighted, using the following definitions as needed:

- **Primary sources** are accounts of an event or a period in time by people who experienced them firsthand. Examples include diaries, letters, interviews, speeches, photos, and audio and video recordings
- **Secondary sources** interpret primary sources. They are at least one step removed from the actual event or period and provide a secondhand account. Examples include books, articles, documentaries, and many of the handouts and textbook accounts used in schools.

5 Students return to the charts created in step 4 and label the sources they listed as ‘P’ (primary) or ‘S’ (secondary). They note any additional sources they might use in their study of the Holocaust. The class discusses why using primary sources – particularly visual history testimony – to learn about the Holocaust is valuable, and what they can learn from this type of source material that they cannot from a textbook or other secondary source.



II: WHAT WAS THE HOLOCAUST AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR US TO STUDY IT?

TARGET AUDIENCE: GRADES 8-12

ESTIMATED TIME OF LESSON: UP TO 45 MINUTES

1 In pairs or small groups, students review and discuss the handout, [Holocaust Definitions](#), which includes overviews from three different organizations. They then take notes and answer the questions on the handout, [Holocaust Definitions: Sorting It Out](#). As a class, students discuss their observations and responses in order to discover common threads among the definitions and better understand the language used to define the Holocaust. **OPTION:** Students form small groups and each group reviews one definition of the Holocaust. Groups report back on their findings and students discuss similarities and differences as a class.


2 The handout, Genocide Definition, is projected and students read this definition together. The following questions are discussed:

- How does the definition of genocide correspond with the Holocaust definitions you read?
- What other examples of genocide are you aware of? (Student examples are listed on the board. Note - emphasize that genocide is a legal definition and that while there are other tragedies that exist in the world, not all tragedies are genocides.)
- How are all of these examples connected? What common themes lie at the core of them all?
- Why do you think it's important for us to learn about the Holocaust and other examples of genocide?

3 As a summative task, students identify three reasons why the Holocaust is an important historical topic or time period to study, and write them on individual index cards. They are encouraged to think specifically about the persecution of Jewish people and also make connections to other examples of injustice. Students' cards can be collected to check for understanding of lesson concepts.

4 As a follow-up to this lesson, students work in small groups to sort and synthesize the reasons they identified in the summative task until they come up with a manageable list. Their reasons are written on a class chart, which is posted prominently and serves as a rationale for the class' study of the Holocaust.

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

 Leon Bass served in a segregated military unit in World War II. He and thousands of other Black Americans faced racism and discrimination at home even as they fought for freedom in Europe. The Langston Hughes poem, "[Beaumont to Detroit: 1943](#)," explores this contradiction by setting Nazi persecution abroad against race riots that took place in Beaumont, Texas and Detroit, Michigan in 1943. Read the poem and write an essay in which you explore some of the following questions:

- What comparisons does Langston Hughes make between Nazism and Jim Crow racism? What is he trying to say by associating the two, even though there are many significant differences between them?
- How do you think it felt for Black servicemen and their families to sacrifice for their countries during World War II when Jim Crow racism was widespread in the U.S.?
- What do you think it was like for Black servicemen to return to the U.S. after helping to liberate Europe? How might their perspectives and their expectations have changed?
- How do you view the struggles of people like Leon Bass and Roman Kent and efforts to achieve racial equity in the U.S. today? How are they all connected?

REFERENCES

- Echoes & Reflections. (2026, January 29). *Studying the Holocaust*. <https://echoesandreflections.org/unit-1-studying-the-holocaust/?state=open#content>