



LESSON PLAN: Building a Foundation for Studying the Holocaust

INTRODUCTION

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.

PART 1: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST AND WHAT ARE OUR SOURCES OF INFORMATION?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

- 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.¹
- 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: **Roman Kent (bio)** and **Leon Bass (bio)**. As they watch the clips, students take notes on the handout, *Testimony Reflections*, found at the beginning of this unit.
- 3** ²After 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”?

¹ *Impress upon students that the survivors they will meet in the visual history testimonies are the exception – about 6 million of the 9.5 million Jews who lived in Europe before World War II were murdered during the Holocaust.*

² *It is often beneficial for students to watch each clip twice, completing the Testimony Critical Thinking Guide during the second viewing.*

- 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?

4 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 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.³

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST	HOW WE KNOW IT - THE SOURCES OF OUR KNOWLEDGE	QUESTIONS WE HAVE/WHAT WE WANT TO LEARN

5 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.

6 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.

PART 2: WHAT IS THE HOLOCAUST AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR US TO STUDY IT?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

7 In pairs or small groups, students review and discuss the handout, **Holocaust Definitions**, which includes overviews from three different organizations. They take notes and answer the questions on the handout, **Holocaust Definitions: Sorting It Out**. As a class, students discuss their observations and

³ 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.

responses in order to discover common threads among the definitions and better understand the language used to define the Holocaust.⁴

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.

8 The handout, **Genocide**, 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.]*
- 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?

9 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.

10 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.

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 90 MINUTES

⁴ A differentiation can be made between the general meaning of the word "holocaust" (mass destruction or slaughter) and the use of "the Holocaust" to describe the mass murder of Jewish people during a particular period in history. Compare the use of "the Holocaust" to the use of "9/11" in that both refer to a specific historic event during a particular time.