



## Transition Year Module in Holocaust Studies

### 2. Why Teach the Holocaust?

*'The history of the genocide perpetrated during the Second World War does not belong to the past only. It is a 'living history' that concerns us all, regardless of our background, culture, or religion. Other genocides have occurred after the Holocaust, on several continents. How can we draw better lessons from the past?'* Irina Bokova. Director-General of UNESCO, 27 January 2012.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'s mission is to promote peace-building, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education and culture. UNESCO was created in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and was shaped by the context of that war, and the recognition of the nature of Nazi ideology. For the first time, a state had pursued as a matter of national policy the annihilation of groups deemed unworthy of living. The reality of the Holocaust (known also as the Shoah) and the attempted destruction of Jewish people constituted a systematic programme of mass extermination unprecedented in history.

The nature and extent of the mass murder carried out by Nazi Germany, underpinned by racial ideology, and seeking to define certain groups of people as inferior and unworthy of life, was the context that gave rise to a new word being formed: Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin coined the term 'genocide'. UNESCO has set out a rationale for the teaching of the Holocaust that is rooted in the conviction that young people must learn about the Holocaust to better understand the cause of Europe's descent into genocide, and the subsequent development of laws and institutions designed to prevent and punish genocide, so that similar mass atrocities can be avoided in the future.

This commitment to ensuring that future generations must never forget what happened and must learn from these events is also evident in the Irish school curriculum. The designation of 'special core status' to Junior Cycle History means that all junior cycle students will study the subject and will encounter the Holocaust in the course of their studies. Specifically, at the end of three years of studying history at post-primary level they will be able to:

- *examine life in one fascist country .... in the twentieth century* (learning outcome 3.9)
- *explore the significance of genocide, including the causes, course, and consequences of the Holocaust* (learning outcome 3.10)

In fulfilling these learning outcomes, students will explore the experience of Jewish people living under fascism and trace the course of events that led to the annihilation of 6 million of their number in Europe, while also learning about the fate of other oppressed minorities.

UNESCO holds that fundamentally, teaching the Holocaust can heighten awareness of the danger of genocide in the contemporary world and bring to the fore an appreciation for individual rights and

universal values. In this context, and in the context of the development of the TY course, it is useful to explore some aspects of the rationale articulated by UNESCO for this important work.<sup>1</sup>

### ***1. The Holocaust was a defining moment in history<sup>2</sup>***

There is a consensus among historians that the Holocaust has characteristics that appear in other genocides, including the targeting of a specific victim group or groups, mass violence perpetrated against that group and the deprivation of that group of the essentials required for existence. But the Holocaust also has characteristics that make it a distinct and unprecedented phenomenon in history. For instance, it was the intention of the Nazi regime as the war unfolded to murder every Jewish person in territories it controlled. Moreover, the annihilation of the Jews served no pragmatic purpose or was not primarily motivated by economic or political considerations – their destruction was based on a racist ideology. Consider this statement: ‘Race is the decisive and moulding force in the life of nations. Language, culture, customs, piety, traditions, lifestyle, but also laws, governmental forms and economies, the whole variety of life is racially determined’ (Der Reichsführer SS/SS Hauptamt, *Rassenpolitik*, Berlin, 1943). The centrality of race in Nazi ideology implied a hierarchy where some races were considered superior, and where inferior races could be deemed ‘parasitic’, thus justifying their murder. The distinct and unprecedented nature of this ideology as embodied by a state and realised in the Holocaust makes the study of this phenomenon necessary.

### ***2. Genocide is not inevitable***

It is important for young people to understand that man-made catastrophes like the Holocaust are not accidents of history but could have been prevented. Genocides occur because people and governments make decisions that perpetuate discrimination and persecution. The way the horrors of the Holocaust unfolded illustrates the fateful consequences of human actions and decisions. The complexity of the Holocaust and the confluence of various factors, including historical, economic, religious, and political aspects, as well as the shifting dynamic of the war, affords students many opportunities to consider how human actions were responsible for what unfolded, and how what happened was not somehow inevitable or pre-ordained.

### ***3. States and citizens have responsibilities***

An important factor in teaching the Holocaust is that it enables students to think about political responsibilities and to explore how governmental structures function. The crucial fact that the Holocaust was a state enterprise fully legitimised by law needs to be grasped by young people, as it raises questions about the use and abuse of political power on a national and indeed international level. One dimension of this is the role of governmental and quasi-governmental organisations such as the SA and SS in attacking the Jewish populations of Germany and Europe. Another dimension relates to the actions of German doctors and nurses in the so-called ‘Operation T4’ euthanasia programme in which more than 300,000 people with intellectual and physical disabilities were killed over six years. On an individual level, the participation of regular German soldiers in the murder of over 1 million Jews as part of the killing squads in parts of eastern Europe warrants consideration of human behaviour, human choices and decision making, conformism and the power of ideology to lead people to violate internationally recognised human rights on such a scale.

### ***4. Silence contributes to oppression***

Students should be challenged to think about how doing nothing while others are being brutally oppressed by government or state actions is a form of complicity which, in the case of the Holocaust, had devastating consequences and created a climate where the actions of collaborators became socially tolerable. In exploring this aspect of the Holocaust, students should be aware that, while most people

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from *Why Teach the Holocaust* (UNESCO 2013)

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000218631>

<sup>2</sup> See David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-49*. Pan Macmillan. London: 2016. The introduction section offers interesting thoughts on teaching the Holocaust

did not speak up against the Nazi regime, those who did often had an important impact. Attention should be drawn to the actions of thousands of non-Jewish people who risked their lives to save Jews from being murdered: hiding them, providing false papers, rescuing children, or helping people to escape. Other examples of individual courage in the face of Nazi brutality include the objections of some religious leaders to the T4 euthanasia policy and the remarkable actions of non-Jewish German women who were married to Jewish men, and whose protests in the 'Rosenstrasse' demonstrations led to the men's release. Positive examples of individual and collective action in the face of state oppression are important for young people to hear about in understanding how the choices and decisions individuals make can have profound effects.

#### **5. *Prejudice and racism have roots***

Studying the Holocaust offers important insights into the nature of prejudice and racism, and their political, social, and economic ramifications. The identification of Jewish people and other groups in Nazi Germany as 'others', their stereotyping, stigmatisation, de-humanisation and ultimate destruction has parallels in instances of genocide in Cambodia in the 1970s and Rwanda in the 1990s. Teaching and learning about the Holocaust can enable students to appreciate and be sensitive to the position of minorities in society and to accept and celebrate diversity.

The emergence of the specific form of racism encapsulated in antisemitism is important to consider. Rooted in ancient theological anti-Judaism, antisemitism in Europe in the 1930s was also based on nineteenth century pseudo-scientific racist theories (e.g. Eugenics) and was further fuelled by socio-political and economic developments both in Germany and internationally. This study also allows for reflection on modern forms of antisemitism, evident in incitement to hatred, violence and Holocaust denial or distortion.

The value of such study is emphasised in this statement:

*'My understanding of genocide is that it is an extreme form of identity-related conflict stemming not from the mere differences between groups, but from the implications of those differences, reflected in gross inequalities, discrimination, marginalisation, exclusion, stigmatisation, de-humanisation and denial of fundamental rights. The most effective form of prevention is therefore constructive management of diversity to promote equality, inclusivity, respect for fundamental rights and observance of democratic values and practices.'* Francis Deng, *Special Adviser of the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, End of Assignment Note, 2012.*

#### **6. *Modern technology can be abused***

Study of the Holocaust indicates how mass violence and murder was enabled through the utilisation of the best available technology. Learned engineers and architects, many associated with well-known and respected businesses and firms, designed, and built gas chambers in which millions of people were murdered. In a more general sense, the Holocaust, like more recent instances of genocide, was facilitated by the governmental structures of a nation state, planned by an established bureaucracy, facilitated by different parts of society, and perpetrated by state-affiliated military groups using the most efficient means at their disposal to pursue their murderous policies. Learning about the power of technology in this way can also support students' understanding of contemporary violations of human rights enabled by technology and social media.