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Out of the Darkness: Stories from the Holocaust

The Holocaust is the darkest chapter of Jewish history, a time of unimaginable suffering and sorrow. In this class, we'll examine the history, hear testimony, and recommit to building a world in which, someday, such horrors will be impossible.

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Biblical Anti-Semitism

Pharaoh: “And a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelites are growing too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise, in the event of war they may rise up and join our enemies.’” (Ex. 1:8-10)

Haman: “Haman said to King Ahasuerus: ‘There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among us, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king, and it is not in your Majesty’s interest to tolerate them.’” (Esther 3:8)

Antiochus: “Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, and that each should give up his customs. And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to their land, to forbid burnt offerings and sacrifices in the Sanctuary, to profane the sabbaths and the feasts, to defile the Sanctuary and the priests, to build altars and sacred precincts and shrines for idols, to sacrifice swine and unclean animals, and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane, so that they should forget the law and change all the ordinances. And, whoever does not obey the command of the king shall die.” (1 Maccabees 1:41-50)

What themes do you notice in common among these stories?

What relationship does this form of anti-Semitism bear to modern expressions?

Why do you think each of these stories came to be associated with a holiday?

Religious Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism changes significantly with the introduction of rival monotheistic faiths. First, Christianity sought to take up the mantle of Biblical Judaism and rejected its parent religion through the doctrine of supersession. Later, Islam claimed that it was the inheritor of the Biblical tradition and superseded all previous traditions. Judaism's refusal to acknowledge both Christian and Muslim claims of superiority led to ongoing persecution.

...in the Christian World

Jews living under Christian rule faced consistent persecution, and the ever-present thread of expulsion or outbursts of violence.

Ecclesia et Synagoga, meaning “Church and Synagogue,” are figures frequently found in medieval Christian art. They often appear sculpted as large figures on either side of a church portal. The synagogue is always looking downward and is blindfolded, symbolizing the Jews’ “rejection” of Jesus.

The image on the right is among the most famous of examples of this motif, found in the Strasbourg Cathedral in Alsace, France.

...in the Muslim World

Dhimmi Laws: Under the 7th century “Pact of Umar,” Jews (and Christians) were placed under a special status of *dhimmi*, meaning a second-class citizen, but ones protected from being killed (unlike a non-monotheistic infidel). Various measures were taken against the *dhimmis*, including a special poll tax (*jizya*), requirements to wear identifying clothing, requirements that they step off the curb if a Muslim was walking toward them, etc.

Generally, however, Jews fared better under Islam (with certain exceptions) than under Christianity. While Jews were often persecuted in Muslim countries, they did not face the same consistent level of violence and threat to their lives or property as in Christian Europe.



The Ecclesia et Synagoga motif, found in the Strasbourg Cathedral in Alsace, France.

Racial Anti-Semitism

Beginning in the 19th century, the idea of “race” became popular in Europe. This is strongly linked to the development of modern biology, specifically the idea of taxonomy (ordering higher and lower species) and Darwin’s theory of evolution, which was misunderstood by some to suggest that humans might be ranked from less-evolved forms to more-evolved forms.

Certain anthropologists would fain teach us that all races are equally gifted; we point to history and answer: That is a lie! The races of mankind are markedly different in the nature and also in the extent of their gifts, and the Germanic races belong to the most highly gifted group, the group usually termed Aryan. Physically and mentally the Aryans are pre-eminent among all people; for that reason they are, by right, the lords of the world.

The entry of the Jews into the history of the West signifies, therefore, beyond doubt the entrance of a definite element, quite different from and in a way opposed to all European races. These considerations make it our right and our duty to look upon the Jew in our midst as a peculiar and, in fact, alien element. Outwardly, his inheritance is the same as ours; inwardly, it is not so. He has inherited quite a different spirit...

The chief result of our anatomical survey is that the Jewish race is, in truth, a mongrel race which always retains a mongrel character.

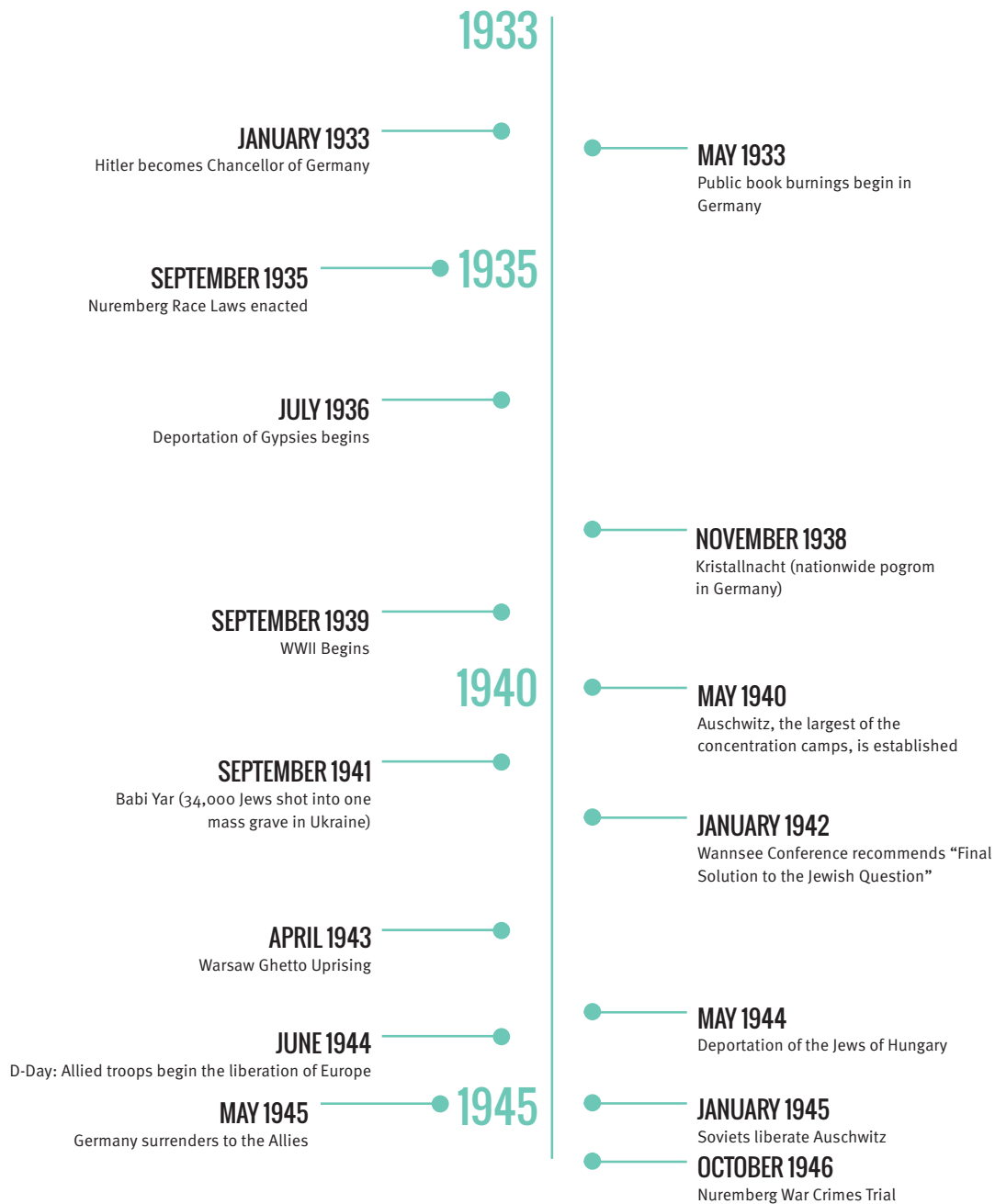
Houston Stewart Chamberlin

Foundations of the 19th Century (1899)



“The Eternal Jew”, this poster was displayed as part of a racist exhibition held at the Deutsches Museum in Munich from November 1937–January 1938, which attracted more than 400,000 visitors.

Timeline of the Holocaust



Discussion Questions

For Those Who Were Raised Jewish:

- How and what did you learn growing up about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust?
- Do you feel safe as a Jew?
- What do you want the non-Jews in your life to understand about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust?
- How do you react to the texts on the facing page?

For Those Who Were Not Raised Jewish:

- How and what did you learn growing up about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust?
- Knowing how people have treated Jews over time, do you feel there is a danger in becoming Jewish or affiliating with the Jewish community?
- As someone who was not raised Jewish, are there ways that you notice that you react differently than the Jews in your life to the topic of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust?
- How do you react to the texts on the facing page?

After the Shoah

There emerges for us a 614th commandment:

The Jew today is forbidden to hand Hitler a posthumous victory.

We are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish People perish.

We are commanded to remember, in our very guts and bones, the martyrs of the Holocaust, lest their memory perish.

We are forbidden to deny or despair of God, however much we may have to contend with God and our beliefs, lest Judaism perish.

We are forbidden to despair of the world as the place which is meant to become the Kingdom of God, lest we help make it a meaningless place.

To abandon any of these imperatives, in response to Hitler's victories at Auschwitz, would be to hand him yet other, posthumous victories.

Professor Emil Fackenheim

The Jewish Return to History (1978)

After Auschwitz, there are times when faith is overcome ... We now speak of "moment faiths," interspersed with times when the flames and the smoke of burning children blot out faith, although it flickers again. The difference between the skeptic and the believer is frequency of faith, not certitude of position.

Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg

Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust (1977)

Reflection on Chapter 16



If your class included the testimony of a Holocaust survivor, take a moment to write your reflections on their story: What struck you most powerfully? What do you want to make sure you remember?

Additional Readings

Books

- Elie Wiesel, *Night*
The Nobel Prize-winning author's candid, horrific, and poignant first-person account of his survival as a teenager in the Nazi death camps.
- Anne Frank, *Diary of a Young Girl*
First published in 1947, this is the journal kept by Anne Frank while in hiding in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation. It has been read and loved by millions of people around the world.
- Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*
An artist uses his medium, in this case the graphic novel, to convey the horrors of the Holocaust.
- Menachem Rosensaft, *God, Faith, & Identity from the Ashes: Reflections of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*
This new volume draws together the reflections of almost ninety children and grandchildren of survivors, from diverse walks of life, to share powerful insights into the way that trauma continues to shape their families and their approach to the world.

Websites

- *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (ushmm.org)*
One of the world's leading centers of research on the Holocaust, with many resources for individuals and educators. The USHMM also works to combat contemporary genocides worldwide.
- *USC Shoah Foundation (sfi.usc.edu)*
The world's most comprehensive collection of audio-video testimonies by Holocaust survivors, many of which are available streaming online.