

Responses to “Multiple Perspectives on the Holocaust?”

Robert Fishman, Bayside High School, Queens, NY:

I agree with Hannah Arendt’s argument about Communism and Fascism having a number of similarities. In both pre-Communist and pre-Fascist nations in Europe, there was an absence of traditional institutions, and this vacuum gave rise to extremist parties. Unlike Communism, Fascism never had a single set of beliefs to guide its adherents. In different countries, fascism meant different things. It was loosely based on a strong connection to nationalism and militarism, and, in the case of Germany, a very strong racial element.

I agree that the potential for horrific abuses rests in the vast majority of societies, but I also think that there were two major historical factors that figured prominently in the ability of the Nazis’ ideology to take and hold total power in Germany. First, a long-time, deep-seated anti-Semitism that existed among many Germans (German Jews had done much to assimilate, but this had not erased the anti-Semitism). Second, a political culture that was steeped in autocracy and/or absolutism, with little or no experience in democracy. I do not think that there are “national characteristics” which suggest that Germans were somehow “genetically” programmed to become Nazis, but I do think that these factors played a major role in the Nazis’ ability to take over Germany.

Joseph Corr, Shaker High School, Latham, NY:

Alan Singer’s observations on the Holocaust as not a uniquely German event, an aberration of historical circumstances and culture, are right on. I try to teach the Holocaust and other human rights violations (especially Rwanda) as essentially a series of choices on a national and personal level. It was clear that evidence was available to indicate, to some the extent, genocide during the Holocaust. Policymakers, political and military, made conscious decisions that it was not in United States national interests to end the tragedy.

The situation was also glaringly apparent in Rwanda. Following a mismanaged intervention in Somalia, it was judged politically risky to classify events there as a genocide and intervene. Again choices were made by governments and populations not to act. Students must see the Holocaust in this light and realize that they have a choice, and a voice, and must respond to future human rights violations.

When I teach the Holocaust, I spend a considerable amount of time focusing on the historical context of anti-Semitic behavior. This includes multiple examples of discrimination throughout history and across Eastern and Western Europe. We try to identify common elements that paved the way for the Holocaust including the facts that Jews were identifiable as a minority, were victims of prior discrimination and thus easy targets for future discrimination, and were victims of numerous examples of violence. Students quickly realize that the phenomena was not uniquely German and conclude that under similar circumstances (remember David Duke’s surprisingly strong showings in Louisiana senatorial and governor’s races in economic hard times), something like this could happen in the United States. I strongly agree that social studies teachers need to focus on the big questions, expand the content base, and promote essential social studies “habits of mind” with all our students.

Daphne Kohavy, Manhattan Village Academy, New York, NY:

While I commend any effort to educate students on the horrors of the Holocaust, I have a big problem with much in the curriculums that are in circulation. None seem to address the recent rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, the resurgence of Nazi propaganda flooding out of the Middle East and the dire need for a Jewish homeland. In my opinion, study of the Holocaust is incomplete unless these are considered.

Many teachers do not want to address anything too controversial in their classes. I hear stories about tremendous complacency on the part of students when the subject is the Holocaust. Some students claim they are tired of hearing about “the Jews” while others are upset that the horrors of slavery are not presented with as much emphasis. Part of the problem is that students do not learn to think of Jews as an example of a people who have been displaced and have suffered as a result. Teachers must provide them with the bigger picture, including showing how anti-Semitism dates back to Medieval times.

Bobbie Robinson, Kennedy H.S., Plainview, NY:

Last spring, as I helped prepare 8th grade New York City students for their state assessment, we raced through the last chapters of the American history curriculum. In a lesson on World War II, I included a photograph of a Jewish prisoner in a concentration camp. The picture had no caption and I asked the students who they thought this person might be, how old did they think he was, and how could they tell? Some of the students deduced that he was a prisoner of some sort by his striped shirt. Further questions asked them to think about how long he had been a prisoner, what the star on the shirt meant, and how he might have become a prisoner. No one guessed that he was a Jewish prisoner during World War II. The students simply had no prior knowledge that could allow them to figure this out for themselves, but they were quickly intrigued by the mystery this picture represented to them. Their shock turned immediately to questions about how this could happen. These questions, and their answers, took us to a discussion of the part that ordinary Germans played in turning over the Jews and other targets of Hitler's hate. The students were sitting in groups of four or five, and I moved about the room giving them roles to imagine. I described the SS and the fear the Germans had of the secret police. I told them, "You are afraid that your neighbor (pointing to a student in the group) might turn you in for breaking the law, what do you do?" Again and again, most, though not all, of the students replied, "I would turn him/her in first (as they pointed to the fellow student)."

This lesson on the holocaust touched on the complicity of ordinary people and began a search for an answer to the question that the students had raised "How could this happen?" In the 8th grade American history curriculum at the end of the year, there was barely time for more. We talked about the number of people killed by the Nazis, numbers which amazed the students and left them asking, "Why didn't anybody stop them?" What struck me was that this lesson was the first time these students had ever heard of the Holocaust. As recent immigrants to the United States from countries that played no part in World War II, they would have had no reason to learn about it. The lesson on Hiroshima shocked them as well, for the same reason. I think that as teachers in New York, either Jewish ourselves or surrounded by many adult Jews who carry an acute awareness of the Holocaust with them, we sometimes forget that children cannot know this history until they are taught it. Many of our students may be encountering the Holocaust for the first time. At the same time, some of our students have parents who escaped other, more recent, genocides; some children may have witnessed similar atrocities themselves. This long introduction leads me to two salient issues for myself as a teacher.

First, I think we need to help students to ask and then consider the question, "How could this happen?" My experience suggests that this is the question they will come up with. If we allow the lesson to build from this starting point, it will engage the students and drive them to find out more. I think students, and perhaps some teachers, at first want to reduce the cause of the Holocaust to a simplistic answer. However, the Holocaust provides a vivid example of the complexity of history and the need to look at the multiple factors that worked together to create the Holocaust. Students will quickly come up with reasons for the genocide. Teachers must build on this to say, "Yes, but don't stop there. Keep looking. What else was happening?"

Students should learn that both nations and individuals share some measure of responsibility for this horrific event. For example, Michael Beschloss' new book, *The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman, and the Destruction of Hitler's Germany 1941-1945* presents FDR's thoughts about whether the allies should try to disable the transports or crematoriums at Auschwitz and demonstrates that culpability for the Holocaust is still a topic for debate six decades later. Students should also consider the role of the French and pro-Nazi collaborators in a number of countries. One of my colleagues presents high school students with data showing the number of people turned in to the secret police by their fellow Germans, numbers which graphically illustrate that the Nazi enforcers themselves had to do very little to find their victims. It is important to discuss the issue of responsibility, not so we can create a list of weak or evil or inhuman people to lay blame on, but so that students realize how very much like us most of these people probably were. Hitler and the Nazis successfully played on the fears of thousands to help them accomplish their goals. Unless we and our students are aware of this, we are always in danger of falling into this trap ourselves.

The second point I raise with students is the idea that the Holocaust, while almost unimaginable in its horror, is not the only, or even the worst example of genocide in modern history. Students can examine readily available data on genocides in the Soviet Union, China, Bosnia, Rwanda, and other regions around the world to realize the extent of killing that has occurred over the last 100 years. The website *users.eroles.com* lays this information out decade by decade in easy to read format. As students move through the web pages, they can see the changing locales of

genocide dramatically illustrated with skulls that have been marked on maps representing the thousands or even millions of people killed. Together, these maps show us how sadly common genocide has become. We need to help students realize that there is a continuum when it comes to hatred and organized killing. Students should discuss at what point on this continuum murder crosses over into genocide. Can we call the devastating results of the European's discovery of the America's genocide? Was the Great Irish Famine genocide? Were Pol Pot's atrocities genocide? Are the UN/U.S economic sanctions against Iraq acts of genocide? Is all "ethnic cleansing" genocide? Is some? How do we decide?

If students are taught that the Holocaust is unique, then I think it becomes too easy to label the perpetrators as "other" and to imagine that their actions can never be repeated. I think we need to examine other mass killings, their causes, and their perpetrators to look for shared reasons. We need to see the ways that we allow injustices to continue and to ask ourselves if we would do any differently than the Germans who went along with the Nuremberg Laws and Kristellnacht. Do people, ourselves included, continue to look the other way while others who are different and distant die horrible deaths from violence, disease, and starvation? If only the Holocaust were unique in human history. Sadly, it is not.

Lorraine Teller, Essex County Voc-Tech, West Orange, NJ:

Since Alan Singer has presented us with multiple perspectives on the Holocaust I feel comfortable responding to the article from multiple perspectives. As an ordained rabbi, an ordained inter-faith minister and the dean of the All Faiths Seminary in New York City, my first response would be; one cannot have light and darkness in the same moment, nor can one have faith and fear at the same time. One must conquer the other. As an educator in a public school my second response would be more in concert with the needs of my students. My students see much darkness in the world, not unlike many of us felt during the Cold War during those locker bomb drills. Do some of you remember being on the cold floor, in front of your locker, sitting cross-legged with your coat over your head and shoulders? While our students haven't had that experience they have watched the towers burn. They have seen terrorist aggression in its ugliest form, here at home. I want, with all my heart, to answer the angst of my students with light and faith.

Am I allowed to do that? Or is that where my worlds collide as a minister, rabbi and public school teacher. This month's issue of NEA Today contains an article, Navigating Religion in the Classroom. Is this the heralding of a new perspective on teaching in public schools or has someone finally realized what Social Studies educators have always know: we will be condemned to relive our historical mistakes if we don't learn our historical roots and revelations. And is it just serendipity that provides this article at the same time Alan Singer's article appears. Perhaps we have come to maturity in the world, owning up to the reality that our world does have some basis in religion and our history is not complete without it.

So we turn to Singer's article. The answers to the questions from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, as well as the essential questions presented will give our students the historical perspective they need to deal with today's historical and political realities. The answers provide a jumping off point from which our students can become critical thinkers and solid future citizens of the world, voters in the democracy. But there is something more, and it is in that something more that I find my own comfort zone between "preach" and "teach", two facets of my world that I navigate from a back and forth stance. It is the lessons learned from the study of Holocaust that seem to me, the real diamonds in the rough. As Singer quotes, "They need to understand the processes that can result in genocide, as well as the human forces that can prevent or resist it."

When our students can confidently deal with the realities, as well as the myths and legends, of the Holocaust; when they can put the atrocities in some perspective, even just to admit that evil exists in our world; when they can trace the rise of one event, not as isolated but as coming out of the life and times, the facts and fictions of a certain place, then they can truly learn the lessons of the Holocaust. And that is the juncture at which we must be there, for them, as we the adults give them our truth that one cannot stand in the darkness and the light in the same instance. Nor can one have overwhelming fear when faith in something beyond ourselves (different for each of us) is present. We can give our students the facts, the definitions, the realities and help them to form their own understanding of Holocaust. After they have assimilated all the "history" we must then be there to offer our students hope; the hope we hold in them, as our future. We must be those mentors for the future teachers, diplomats, politicians, historians and even generals of the world to come. Our students, ourselves, deserve no less.

Neal Shultz, New Rochelle H.S., New Rochelle, NY:

I teach the Shoah, firstly, so that children may gain knowledge. Genocide it may be, but the Holocaust is still history. Children reap rewards when they struggle to get the facts straight, especially when, the facts are so twisted. It makes a difference to know the exact percentage of German citizens in the Nazi party, the reasons Treblinka closed while Auschwitz expanded, and what flavor cake a Dutch Jew ate before deportation. Close study of any history sharpens the mind, but the Shoah is the pre-eminent topic for high school students to examine because of the wealth of primary documents and details accessible to them. Scrutiny also honors the victims of the tragedy. “The big things every one knows and no one needs to write about them,” Victor Klemperer writes in his searing diary of the Nazi years, *I Will Bear Witness*. But he adds, “It’s not the big things that are important to me, but the everyday life of tyranny [which] gets forgotten. A thousand mosquito bites are worse than a blow to the head.” I teach so that children so that may know the bites.

I also teach the Shoah to help children learn to think. Depressingly, these days, not even the Holocaust is immune to popular culture’s war on nuance. When *Seinfeld* airs an episode about a “soup Nazi” and Rush Limbaugh popularizes the term “feminazi,” kids can easily grow up believing that every bad person is a Nazi and that every Nazi was demonically bad. This reductionism inevitably drives students to the conclusion that everyone in Germany in the 1930’s was satanic, stupid, or cowardly-and produces a sense of cultural or personal superiority that undercuts education. Teaching the Holocaust subtly, however, can provoke students to become critical thinkers about the present as well as the past. Weighing the Nuremberg Laws against the Jim Crow laws passed in the United States 50 years earlier, for example (or reading Hitler’s praise of the United States’ policy of isolating Indians on reservations), forces students to analyze issues of law, philosophy, biology and historical context. I raise problems with my students not to overwhelm them with unanswerable questions (“Why did it happen?”) or to drive them into cultural relativism. Rather, I hope to hone their own criteria, so that when they do judge they can do it humanely and well.

I teach the Shoah to protect children, too. The Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer has written that there is nothing of value in teaching children about babies burned alive in mass graves. The implication is that educators should not be teaching the Holocaust to adolescents, and that what they are currently teaching is most likely falsely uplifting. But that criticism may be paralyzing to educators and hurtful to children. The news of the Holocaust is already out. Children will hear about atrocities. Or worse, they won’t, if some Holocaust denier is their informant.

I teach the Shoah because, as much as it is in my power to do so, I want to be the intermediary between the material and my students, not concealing the truth but paying it out at a pace that they can absorb.

Or course, in the end, I teach the Shoah to prepare my students to help save the world. Not every one believes this goal can be achieved. One of the greatest Holocaust educators I know points out that no study has ever proved any correlation between learning about the Shoah and becoming more moral and politically active. Then again, faith always eludes empirical proof. Albert Camus recognized this when he wrote that “the great tragedies of history overwhelm men with encroaching power. Paralyzed they do nothing, until one day the gorgon devours them. But I mean to convince you that there is only an illusion of impotence. That strength of character, courage and imagination are enough to stop evil . . . and sometimes reverse it.” I teach the Holocaust because I, too, have faith that my students have far more power than they realize-the powers to know, to think, to recognize evil and to speak out and act against it.

Wendy Lindner, Freeport H.S., Freeport, NY:

In the aftermath of 9/11/01, I think the Holocaust was supplanted in the minds of many Americans as a symbol of historic evil by the destruction of the World Trade Center. When I tried to teach about the Holocaust last year, some students protested that they had already studied about it in the fifth grade and wanted to learn more about events in the contemporary world. My students’ connection with September 11 was personal, while the Holocaust seemed so far removed from them. Part of the terror of 9/11/01 is that we all seemed to have lost someone we knew. Even when we did not, names and faces covered the front-page of newspapers and we watched on television as families awaited confirmation of the death of a loved one. Their loss became our personal loss.

However, my own commitment to understanding and teaching about the Holocaust was renewed. As I watched the lines of people trying to escape from downtown Manhattan, their plight reminded me of the insanity of the displaced persons camps soon after World War II. I saw dazed and dusty survivors of 9/11/01 walking the same dusty road as the dazed survivors of Bergen-Belsen, each searching for a place to sit and a reason to continue on.

The lesson I learned is that when I teach about the Holocaust again I cannot just supply statistics of the dead or stress the methodology of extermination. In order for Holocaust Education to truly be meaningful, I have to find a way to personalize this tragic stain on the face of humanity. I must visually bombard students with names and faces. They need to see pictures, speak with survivors and learn the names of victims. The Holocaust must become a personal issue for them.

One of the things I was finally able to do successfully was to draw connections between the Holocaust and our current concern about terrorism. During the course of the year, my students maintained an internet link with a sister school in Israel. This permitted students from both groups to share their disbelief at the tragedies that happened on 9/11/02 and on a more regular basis in Israel. One morning we learned of the loss of two Israeli students to terrorists. My students cried out for this misery to stop. Pain and suffering had become a way of life. My passion for this subject runs far too deep to put into words or to frame an objective response to the essay by Alan Singer. It seems impossible when these moments in history burn in my soul.

Bill Pesda, Ocean City High School, Ocean City, NJ: As we begin the new millennium the urgency for Holocaust and multicultural studies has increased. The events of the past year and the growing age of Holocaust survivors make it even more important to focus study on cultural awareness and remembrance. Teachers must guarantee that students know the Holocaust, remember it, and mature into adults who will not allow history to repeat itself. We cannot rely on the regular curriculum and books. Holocaust survivor organizations offer their services for sharing facts and telling their stories in schools. As survivors reach the horizon of their lives we need to utilize their priceless value as first hand witnesses. In my experience teaching about the Holocaust, students commonly ask, "This is so sad, why do we have to talk about this?" My response is that if we do not talk about it, do not learn the facts and remember, we open the door so these events can happen again. As educators we must work with the broader community to keep that door slammed shut forever.

Lisa Ann Wohl, East Meadow, NY: When approaching the Holocaust, I find it impossible to separate myself from my Jewish upbringing and heritage. What angers me more than anything else is that the world sat back and did nothing to save Jews from extermination. I believe that Alan Singer had only the best intentions in mind when he wrote this essay and reading it was an eye-opening experience. However, I also have points of significant disagreement. The negative reference to Oskar Schindler is unfair. He saved over 1,000 Jewish men, women and children, who would otherwise have perished. He should be revered, not criticized. Winston Churchill, one of the most brilliant men of his time, is unfairly represented by one obscure quotation. The Holocaust is an expansive enough topic without adding in the specter of communism. Dr. Singer reinforces negative stereotypes of Jews when he states that as a group they were identifiable by their dress and culture and therefore, easy to target for discrimination. I beg to differ. Often Jews, especially German and Austrian Jews, looked no different than their Aryan neighbors. My grandfather had strawberry blond hair and blue eyes and looked "typically" German.