

# Choiceless Choices: An Exploration of the Nine Principles of Economics in Relationship to the Holocaust

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## LESSON

### Target Audience:

Grades 9-12  
Economics/Government

### Time Required:

Two 90-minute block periods

### Content Standards Addressed:

California Principles of American Democracy and Economics

1. Econ 12.1 - Students understand common economics terms and concepts and the need for choices.
2. Econ 12.1.3 – Identify the differences between monetary and nonmonetary incentives and how changes in incentives cause changes in behavior.
3. Gov 12.9 - Students analyze the origins, characteristics, and development of different political systems across time, with emphasis on the quest for political democracy, its advances, and its obstacles.
4. Gov 12.9.1 – Explain how different political philosophies influence economic policies, social welfare policies, and human rights practices.

### Lesson Overview

Studying the nine principles of economics through the lens of first-person video testimony will illustrate how choice and the economic decision-making process can be distorted by circumstance. In addition, by juxtaposing an exploration of the principles designed to underscore a free market and a free people with the extreme opposite circumstances the aim is to build an appreciation for government, government policy, and measured choices.

This lesson uses excerpts culled from Holocaust survivor video testimony from USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive as a lens to think about the economic principles.

### Student Objectives

- To broaden student understanding of the impact of circumstances on both personal and governmental choices.
- To deepen the understanding of the implications of choices, and to understand circumstances when personal choices do not apply.
- To encourage exposure to, and empathy for, individuals whose life experiences may be different from our own.
- To make students aware of the necessity for context in evaluating historical narrative.

### Materials

- [Introduction to the Holocaust](#), from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *Holocaust Encyclopedia*
- [The Holocaust and World War II: Timeline](#), from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *Holocaust Encyclopedia*
- PowerPoint: *Choiceless Choices*, includes the following excerpts of testimony from USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive:
  - Renée Firestone — Eco-Nomos - The Law of the Household (1:00)
  - Renée Firestone — Consider Property Rights (1:32 )
  - Renée Firestone — Consider Benefits and Costs (1:46)
  - Renée Firestone — Consider Government Policies (1:19)
- *Choiceless Choices* PowerPoint Script, includes transcripts of testimony excerpts
- Transcripts of testimony excerpts used in *Choiceless Choices* PowerPoint (student handout)

# Choiceless Choices: An Exploration of the Nine Principles of Economics in Relationship to the Holocaust

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### Prior Knowledge/Background Information

- Students should have prior knowledge of the Holocaust before this lesson.
- The *Introduction to the Holocaust* and the *Holocaust and World War II: Timeline* articles (see Materials section) should be reviewed prior to using the PowerPoint, and used in addition to the documentary film, *The Last Days*, to ensure that students have a contextual understanding of the Holocaust.
- Instructors should be prepared to discuss the nature of survivor video testimony and having some knowledge of the USC Shoah Foundation's work is an asset ([sfi.usc.edu](http://sfi.usc.edu)).
- Instructors will also want to introduce, or revisit, the Nine Economic Principles as articulated by the California Council on Economic Education at [www.ccee.org](http://www.ccee.org). The PowerPoint Script provides teaching points for the principles should they be unfamiliar to the instructor.
- If the instructor chooses to show a film about the Holocaust prior to the lesson, the documentary, *The Last Days*, is a good complement to this lesson (with the caveat that the film focuses on the Hungarian experience specifically).

### Suggestion for Teaching

*Choiceless Choices: An Exploration of the Nine Principles of Economics in Relationship to the Holocaust* contains an exploration of the nine principles of economics as articulated by the California Council on Economic Education. Ideally, this lesson can be used as a mid-year bridge between Economics and Government classes. In its original design, the purpose was to connect the two disciplines with this lesson acting as a review of Economics and economic principles, which were taught in the first half of the year, as well as being an introduction to the application of those principles by governments.

This lesson employs excerpts of video testimony of a Holocaust survivor as a lens to think about the economic principles, and to consider circumstances in which they might apply to both the individual and governmental decision-making process.

**(Note:** Lawrence L. Langer is a U.S. scholar of Holocaust literature and Professor Emeritus at Simmons College in Boston. Langer is the foremost scholar of the Holocaust in the field of literature and testimony. In *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (1982), he coined the term “choiceless choices” to describe the unprecedented situations of conflict that Jews found themselves in during the Holocaust. While this lesson takes a broader use of the term to explore how choice and the economic decision-making processes can be distorted by circumstances, it is recognized that ‘choiceless choices,’ in its purest form is about the Jewish experience during the Holocaust.)

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### Assessment

Students can be asked to assess the value of using survivor video testimony and how they felt about its use in relationship to exemplifying economic principles. It would be of value to ask students to report their opinions about hearing history from one who has lived it.

### Additional Resources

To provide more context about the Holocaust as pertaining to this lesson, instructors/students may consult the following sources:

- The Holocaust—Economic Exploitation, Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team (H.E.A.R.T): <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/economics/index.html>
- Aktion Reinhard Balance Sheet, Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team (H.E.A.R.T): <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/economics/arbbalancesheet.html>
- Gruner, Wolf. *Jewish Forced Labor Under the Nazis: Economic Needs and Racial Aims, 1938-1944*. Cambridge University Press/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006.
- *The Last Days* – Documentary film produced by USC Shoah Foundation, 1998