

The Holocaust and American Culture

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When the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. opened in 1993, some people asked why a “European” catastrophe was being memorialized alongside shrines to Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln while there was still no museum documenting the experience of African slaves in the United States. One answer is that in the years since World War II, the experience and memory of the experience that came to be known as the Holocaust has deeply shaped American culture. This course explores how Nazism and the Holocaust have been understood, interpreted and constructed by American scholars and the larger American society since the 1930s. Taking a chronological approach, the course follows the evolution of historical and popular ideas in America concerning the Nazi party’s rise to power, the regime’s racial policies, its treatment of Jews’ rights during the war, its tactics of propaganda, and its organization of the Holocaust, the term by which the mass murder of European Jewry came to be known. This course considers how American scholars and laymen saw these phenomena through the analysis of different types of sources that lay bare the numerous conflicting perspectives on this regime and its racial policies that resonated with American society. We will examine documentary films, television shows, memoirs, survivor testimonies, as well as other scholarly and popular representations of the Holocaust. This course highlights how the codification of the Holocaust as a specific historical epoch and Nazism as a movement changed America: by engendering a distrust of the masses among liberal intellectuals; by promoting civil liberties and religious toleration; by encouraging a view of the Soviet Union as equivalent to Nazi Germany; by making the imperatives of protecting human rights and stopping genocide central to foreign policy; and by providing a new focus for American Jewish identity. Through these and other topics students will analyze the role that the image and reality of the Holocaust continues to play in American life and consider what role it may play as we enter the 21st century.

Course Requirements.

- Regular attendance and active participation. This course meets only two hours a week. Therefore, arriving on time and staying for the full two hours is essential. Students who miss class (or substantial portions of a class) for reasons such as having a cold or a job interview will be penalized. Students who must be absent must provide the instructor with some form of documentation.

Unlike a large lecture course, the purpose of a seminar like this is to teach students to develop their own ideas and share them with their peers in a respectful manner. The very work of the course consists of engaging in an ongoing discussion about a set of ideas concerning how the Holocaust is theorized, conceptualized and narrated in the United States. Students who abstain from discussion are missing the course’s whole purpose. Accordingly, attendance and active participation both will count for 50 percent of the term grade.

- Weekly papers about the readings. Students are required to write four [4] short papers in this course, roughly 300-500 words analyzing some salient aspect of the reading and raising questions for discussion. It must be posted on the class Courseworks site 24 hours before the class meets and the readings are to be discussed. Late papers will not be accepted. In this course, we will have access to the thousands of interviews collected by the Spielberg Shoah foundation. We will use this rich resource to think about how various historians and

scholars have cast certain events, perhaps in contrast to the first-hand accounts presented by those interviewed by the Shoah Foundation. Consider how the oral histories add to your week's topic or how do they complicate the scholarly arguments presented. During the first week, we will learn how to access these materials.

- Classroom presentations. Each week one student will prepare a 15-minute presentation framing the main theme of the week and raising questions about the books or articles under discussion. This presentation should briefly summarize the book and then situate the book within its intellectual context. This may mean researching and explaining any number of things: the author's background and politics; how the book was received upon publication; what debates it gave rise to; or how it relates to other literature on the topic. The presentation should also include a few questions to guide the class discussion.
- Two analytical source papers. Students will write one short papers of 1,500-2,000 words (6-8 pages) concerning how the various source materials available in America to study the Holocaust have been used. In this paper, you want to explore the strengths and weaknesses of a particular source and then discuss how they have been used to tell the story of the Holocaust. Examples of types of sources are newspapers, radio programs, memoirs, oral histories, television shows, film, and museums. A handout explaining the assignment will be distributed later in the semester. The second paper, due on the last day of class, will be on any topic of interest to you that I approve.

Grading

Attendance	20%
Participation	20%
Weekly assignments and classroom presentation	25%
Analytical Source papers [2]	25%

Reading List.

Articles are available online on Courseworks.

Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came into Power*.

Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*.

Daniel Bell, ed. *The Radical Right*

Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957-1965*

Edward Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*.

Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* [e-book]

Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*.

Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* [e-book]

David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust*.

Weekly Assignments.

* On the Web in Courseworks

September 6: Introduction and Overview: The Holocaust and the Teaching of Jewish History at Columbia University

Sept. 13: **Background: Efforts to Make Sense of Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s**

1. Learning to use the Shoah Foundation Video Archive: Michelle Chesner, Columbia University Library.

Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Part One
Theodore Abel, *How Hitler Came to Power*, 54-110, 204-302

Sept. 20 **Liberation and The Post-1945 American Reaction**

Guest Lecturer: Nancy Sinkoff
Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares*, Introduction
Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Part Two
*Hasia Diner, *We Remember With Love and Reverence*, Introduction
*Sidra Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*, intro, chapter 2

Sept. 27: **Totalitarianism Abroad (Is Communism Nazism?)**

Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, Editor's introduction, pp. 75-156.
Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, ch. 5.
* Les K. Adler, Thomas G. Paterson, "Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930s-1950s," *American Historical Review*, April, 1970, pp. 1046-1064.

Oct. 3 **Totalitarianism At Home (Is McCarthyism Nazism?)**

Daniel Bell, *The Radical Right*. Chs. 1, 3, 5, 7, 13.
* D. F. Fleming, "Are We Moving Toward Fascism?" *Journal of Politics*, Feb. 1954, pp. 39-75.

Oct. 10 **The Slavery Parallel**

Fermaglich, Chapter 2
* Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, chapters 4 and 5.
* Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, pp. 1-26, 81-139, 242-52, 267-77.

Oct. 17 **The Foreign Policy Legacy: Human Rights, Genocide, and Intervention**

Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell*, Preface, chapters, 1-6, 8.
* Raphael Lemkin, "Genocide," *American Scholar*, March 1946.
* Irwin Cotler, "The Holocaust, Nuremberg, and Human Rights."
* Elie Wiesel, "For the Dead and the Living."

Oct. 24 **The Eichmann Debate**

FIRST ANALYTICAL SOURCE PAPER DUE IN CLASS

Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt* 313-396 (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*).
Novick, ch. 7.
* Articles on Arendt-Eichmann affair, from *Partisan Review*, 1963-1964.
* Norman Podhoretz, "Hannah Arendt's Jewish Problem—and Mine."

Nov. 1: **Televising the Holocaust: The Vision of the Holocaust in American Popular Television**

Guest lecturer: Jeffrey Shandler
View: 'This is Your Life: Hanna Kohner' (1953)
Read: Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* [electronic resource], Introduction, 1-132, 155-181

- Nov. 8 **The Rise of Civil Liberties**
Stuart Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice*, 11-133
* Werner Cohn, "The Politics of American Jews."
- Nov. 15 **Mainstreaming the Holocaust, Hollywood Film and the Holocaust film: View *Schindler's List***

* Yosefa Loshitzky, "Introduction."
* Omer Bartov, "Spielberg's Oskar."
* Sara R. Horwitz, "But Is It Good for the Jews?"
* Jeffrey Shandler, "Schindler's Discourse."
* Leon Wieseltier, "Close Encounters of the Nazi Kind."
* Stanley Kauffmann, Review of *Schindler's List* (2 parts).
- Nov. 29 **Chronicling the Holocaust and the Field of Oral History**
Guest Lecturer: Dr. Dan Leshem, The Shoah Foundation
Access the following documents at the Shoah website
http://dornsife.usc.edu/vhi/scholarship/archival_access/collecting/
* *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, 1-44
* Linda Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities," *The Journal of American History* (2002) 89:(2): 588-598
- Dec. 6 **Museums and the Memorialization of the Holocaust, American Style**
Visit to the Museum of Jewish Heritage
Edward Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*
*Jeffrey Shandler, "Heritage and Holocaust on Display: New York City's Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust" (review essay), *The Public Historian*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1999.
*Geoffrey Short, "Holocaust Museum as an Educational Resource: A View from New York City," *Holocaust Studies*
- Dec. 12 **SECOND SOURCE PAPERS DUE AT 5pm**