

# The Shoah and the Camps through a French Lens: Testimony and Literature

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VKC 202

Dr. Colin Keaveney  
Associate Professor of French (teaching)  
Department of French and Italian

Course prerequisite: None  
Course Taught in English

## Course Description and Rationale

In *Literature or Life*, Jorge Semprún grappled with the problem of how to represent the extreme experience of life in Buchenwald concentration camp. Kicking against the accepted wisdom that the camps were somehow beyond representation, and that their former internees unwilling to recount what they had seen, Semprún turned the problem on its head: “Everything about this experience can be expressed,” he argued. “... But can people hear and comprehend everything?... Will they have the necessary patience, passion, compassion and rigor?”

Semprún’s challenge is still relevant today. Until the late 1950s, camp survivors were scarcely listened to; indeed, their stories were often met with embarrassment or impatience. Everybody had suffered, it was felt; no one wanted to hear these awful tales. By the 1990s, however, a vigorous curiosity had developed, fed by representations of the Holocaust in television and cinema. A new literature emerged, in both fiction and non-fiction categories. In parallel, there was a move to collect and archive oral accounts of survivors. We had entered what Annette Wieviorka calls the “era of testimony”. In this new era, the old impatience with the witness has arguably given way to a morbid fascination with suffering. The public is hungry for salacious details of Nazi era atrocities, but is not always patient enough, rigorous enough to “comprehend”.

In this class, we will take France as a case in point. Students shall explore how the concentration and extermination camps have been represented by French internees who went through them and survived. Students will also study representations of the period in film and literature, which raise grave ethical and esthetic questions. Collaboration, resistance, hiding are also a focus of the course. While the perspective of the core texts and testimonies is French, there will be a comparative element to the class—students will also read relevant extracts from accounts emanating from other national, cultural and linguistic perspectives. In short, students will get to better understand what ‘common’ as well as particularly French in these accounts and experiences.

Through the careful reading and analysis of a wide range of materials, students will also think about: 1) how writing, speaking, or visually representing such events engages with past traumas; and 2) how the imperatives to memorialize and testify have influenced the understanding of these experiences.

The first module of the course, “Testimony: the View from France,” will focus on first-hand accounts of exceptional witnesses to the world of the concentration camps: Germaine Tillon, an anthropologist who was deported to Ravensbruck because of her resistance activities; Charlotte Delbo, who was interned in Auschwitz and whose poignant and often lyrical work long languished, underappreciated in her own country; and the artist David Olère, whose drawings bear witness to the horrors of the gas chambers and crematoria, where he worked as part of a *Sonderkommando*. In addition to these extraordinary documents, students will also read extracts from diaries and other memoirs: notably, those of Marguerite Duras awaiting the return of her interned spouse, Robert Antelme, who had been interned as a political prisoner in Buchenwald.

The second module of the course, “Persecutors, Bystanders and Victims Onstage” will introduce students to documentaries such as Lanzmann’s *Shoah* and Ophüls’ *Hôtel Terminus*, which grapple with complex issues of guilt and responsibility. These films will also allow us to discuss the different approaches filmmakers have taken in explaining the complexities of occupation and persecution. This module will also take advantage of the rich Visual History Archive housed at the USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

The last module of the course, “The Shoah: What is Literature for?” will turn to literary representation of the Shoah, and most particularly the ethical problems involved in fictionalizing real people and actual events. This debate emerged in the 1960s with the publication of Jean-Francois Steiner’s novel, *Treblinka*, which triggered a polemic centering on the relationship between historical fact and fictional plausibility. That tension has persisted in France down to this day, as evidenced by the reception of Jonathan Little’s, *Les Bienveillants (The Kindly Ones)*.

## **General course learning objectives**

- To develop the critical skills necessary for the analysis of a wide range of “texts”: literary, cinematic, testimonial, photographic, and theoretical.
- To think, in a comparative manner, about texts from various personal and cultural perspectives.
- To engage with fellow students in discussion or debate of key questions surrounding the Shoah: genocide and mass violence; memory, and representation.
- To be able to formulate a clear and pertinent argument about a given text or corpus and support it lucidly in writing.

## **Specific course learning objectives**

- To gain an appreciation of the different ways in which Second World War deportation, concentration and extermination camps, and survival are thought about, remembered, and represented in France
- To compare these ‘French’ responses to those emanating from other national and ethnic traditions.
- To think critically about representations of the *Shoah* and its repercussions *together* with strategies of resistance in literature, film, and testimony.
- To better understand how experiences of concentration camp life affected individuals, but also how they exerted a lasting influence on socio-cultural and psychic levels.
- To encourage students to think about genocide and mass violence in more complex ways that allow for contradictory or counterintuitive, yet also meaningful and valuable perspectives to emerge.
- To encourage students to seek out further explorations of such issues in literature and film beyond the classroom and the semester’s end.

## **Course Expectations**

- Students are expected to come fully prepared to participate in all class discussions, as discussion is a crucial component to this class.
- Assignments will be published on the class website and students should thus consult this website regularly. Note, the website also contains lists and links to useful resources:  
<https://sites.google.com/site/fren446shoahthrufrenchlens/>
- Students will write short “blog posts” (under ‘Discussions’ in Blackboard) before each class in which 1) they reflect on the reading assignment for that session; and 2) they respond to one other or expand on statements made in the previous session. These blog posts will be evaluated for a grade and, more importantly, will provide a springboard for class discussion. Posts must appear before midnight on Sundays and before midday on Wednesdays to allow students to read them before class.
- Over the course of the semester, students will write three short papers of 3 – 4 pages long. In these papers, students will respond to prompts provided by the professor.
- Students will also write a final paper of 7 – 8 pages. For the final paper, students will choose their own topic, which must first be discussed with and approved by the professor.
- Finally, students will also be responsible for presenting orally in class two readings or films of their choice. These oral presentations will represent an original interpretation of the text in addition to a springboard for class discussion that day.

### **Course Grading and Breakdown**

Attendance, preparation, & participation	15%
Weekly blog postings	10%
Oral presentations	20%
3 Short Papers	10% each
Final Paper	25%

### **Grading scale:**

93 +	A	80-82	B-	67-69	D+
90-92	A-	77-79	C+	63-67	D
87-89	B+	73-76	C	60-62	D-
83-86	B	70-72	C-	Under 60	F

### **Presence and Participation**

Presence and participation being essential in this course, each unexcused absence beyond the first two will cause this part of the grade to be lowered by a point.

### **FRENCH LANGUAGE PROGRAM MAKE-UP POLICY :**

General university policy states that students who can verify that they missed class or were prevented from completing assignments due to illness or religious holidays are permitted to make up the work they missed. Students who miss class because of their performance in university-sponsored events, such as athletic competitions, fine arts performances, ROTC activities, etc, are also allowed to make up the work they missed. The only other valid reasons for making up work are jury duty or a death in the immediate family.

Personal reasons for missing class cannot be excused. These include personal trips to attend university-sponsored events as a spectator, to visit family, to attend weddings, to attend court (except for jury duty), and other personal reasons, even when plane tickets have been purchased.

It is the students' responsibility to provide original documentation to their instructor for all valid absences:

- for illness, a medical excuse from a doctor or appropriate health-care provider is required and is subject to verification. Students using the Student Health Center should have a valid release on file at the SHC with their instructor's name on it;
- for university-sponsored events, an original memo from the appropriate advisor must be provided;
- documentation from a newspaper, funeral, memorial service, etc, must be provided in the event of absence due to a death in the immediate family.

Please note: Documentation must be original, will be verified, and will be kept on file.

### **A NOTE ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND PLAGIARISM**

Plagiarism is a serious offence and could result in your dismissal from USC. A student found to have plagiarized will receive an automatic "Fail" on the paper, and will be reported to the Dean of Students for further disciplinary action.

*Key university documents:*

Trojan Integrity Guide: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/forms/tio.pdf>

Undergraduate Guide for Avoiding Plagiarism: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/forms/tig.pdf>

Here are some general guidelines (as provided in Writing 140 & 340):

- If you borrow any words or ideas – whether you directly quote or paraphrase the material –, you must give credit to your source in your paper.
- Documenting false sources or failure to credit your sources is plagiarism.
- A paper bought or taken from the Internet, or used previously is plagiarized.

### **Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability will receive full support in and out of the classroom. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from Disability Services and Programs each semester. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me by the start of week 2. DSP is located in STU 301 and can be reached at (213) 740-0776 or [ability@usc.edu](mailto:ability@usc.edu).

### **Required Texts**

Laurent Binet, *HHhH*. 2010. (Picador: 2013).

Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995) D805.P7D41613 1995

Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*. 2005 (Harper Collins: 2010)

Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French, and the Jews*. 1993 (University of Nebraska: 1999)

The selections mentioned below will be available on the USC Libraries' ARES system or will be distributed in class.

## **Course Schedule**

### **I. Testimony: the View from France**

Week 1

I - Introduction: What is the Shoah and how did it affect France?

Views of the Shoah and the question of testimony: 3 periods—1) refusal to hear; 2) the era of legal testimony; 3) the era of testimony (the obligation to testify)

II - Bauer (chapter 10, p248-259)

Zuccotti (Introduction, p1-6)

Simone Veil (selections)

Week 2

*Labor Day*

II- The anthropologist's view: Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbruck*. (extracts from part 1)

The Vrba & Wetzler report (1944) ARES

Week 3

I - The poetry of testimony: Charlotte Delbo (*Auschwitz and After*, 3-88)

II - The poetry of testimony: Charlotte Delbo (*Auschwitz and After*, 89-186)

Week 4

I- The poetry of testimony: Charlotte Delbo (*Auschwitz and After*, 187-267)

II - An artist at the heart of darkness: David Olère in the Sonderkommando (sketches; Leavey Reserves)

VHA Testimony: Alexandre Oler (son of David Olère)

Muller, *Eyewitness to Auschwitz* (chap.3) ARES

Week 5

Paris: what the 'disappeared' left behind:

I - Hélène Berr (extracts) ARES

II - Duras, Antelme (extracts) ARES

## **II. Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders Onstage**

Week 6

The Camps: Perpetrators, Victims and the Grey Zone

I - Alain Resnais, *Nuit et brouillard (Night and Fog)* (France, 1955). Leavey Reserves and online

II - Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (France, 1985): Suchomel, *Sonderkommando members*, bystanders, Hilberg (extracts) Leavey Reserves and online

VHA testimonies, Shoah Foundation (Germany, France, US).

Week 7

The Just

I - Pierre Sauvage, *Weapons of the Spirit* (1989) Leavey Reserves

I - VHA testimonies, Shoah Foundation.

Week 8

Eichmann and beyond

I - Claude Lanzmann, *The Last of the Unjust* (2013) Leavey Reserves

II - Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (extracts), etc.

## **III. The Shoah: What is literature for?**

Week 9

The emergence of the Shoah in French literature: The *Treblinka* controversy

I - Schwarzbart, *Le Dernier des justes* (1959) (extracts) ARES

II - Samuel Moyn (extract)

Richard Glazer (open letter)

Week 10

The Limits of Representation: How can one be a perpetrator?

I & II - Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 2010 (France, 2005).

Week 11

I & II - Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 2010 (France, 2005). (continued)

Week 12

I - Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*, 2010 (France, 2005). (continued)

The Limits of Representation: How can one be a hero?

II - Laurent Binet, *HHhH*, 2012 (France, 2010).

Week 13

I & II - Laurent Binet, *HHhH*, 2012 (France, 2010).

Week 14

I - Laurent Binet, *HHhH*, 2012 (France, 2010). Monday (Conclusion)

*Thanksgiving*

Week 15

I & II - Conclusion: Truth, verisimilitude and the ethics of representation in the age of testimony  
Wieviorka (extracts)