

Comprehending the Holocaust

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Course Description:

The Holocaust – Shoah – is a lesson in what happened in our modern rational technological society and in what might happen again in spite of all trusted safety measures. What does it mean to comprehend the Holocaust – is it desirable or possible at all?

The Holocaust as a significant and unique event in history continues to have universal implications. This mass murder has specific features that make it different from all other genocides (we shall briefly discuss the nature of modern genocides, their underlying ideological patterns and their modern features). It is not only a historical event but rather turning-point of our history – a revelation of the “absolute power” and inhumanity (an analysis of which will be discussed). We will go through the rise and history of Christian anti-Judaism, its transformation into modern forms of anti-Semitism; the role of intellectuals, use of propaganda and terror during and before the Holocaust will be discussed and also what makes good people can kill so easily. Also, the phenomenon of “denying the Holocaust”, that is a modern form of antisemitism, will be discussed.

Course Requirements:

Students will present their own summaries of the examined texts. They will also write an essay (some 2500 words) and present it to the others at the end of the semester. The whole course will thus be finished by a small colloquium. In addition, the course will comprise lectures, discussions and close readings of the relevant literature.

Grading Policy:

1. Attendance (AEP only allows one unexcused absence), participation in class and summary of the relevant literature and its presentation (every student will present one summary) = 20 %
2. Summary of the relevant literature and its presentation (every student should present at least one summary) = 15%
3. Midterm exam = 25 %
4. Final exam = 20 %
5. Final paper (2500 words) = 20 %

Mandatory Completion Policy

Note that all mandatory assignments and exams must be completed to the best of your ability in order for your final grade to be issued. Failure to complete a mandatory assignment or exam may result in a failing grade.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A+	97-100	Excellent Work
A	93-97	Outstanding Work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

AEP Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are not tolerated. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the development of knowledge and learning is encouraged at many stages of the learning process. While we value technology for educational purposes, we also value originality and the retainment of knowledge, and thus using AI for assignments and examinations, even if rephrased, is strictly prohibited and considered an academic integrity violation, unless the instructor explicitly allows for it in the context of evaluated work

AEP Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The AEP program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristics, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

AEP Diversity Policy

AEP is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming community that values diversity in all its forms. We believe that one of the most meaningful lessons of studying abroad is learning to navigate and appreciate differences with curiosity and an open mind. While engaging across differences can sometimes be challenging or uncomfortable, these moments are essential for growth and learning. We recognize that every member of our community, even with the best intentions, may occasionally make missteps. Our commitment is to provide a supportive environment where respectful and honest dialogue helps us learn from these experiences, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and broaden their perspective.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1 - Introductory AEP Lecture Series

Week 2 - Introduction. Dear Watson: What do we know about the mass murder?

The aim of this class. Myths and superficial explanations. Elementary facts: when – who – where – how and... first sketches of why. Other terms for the Event. Working on the definition of the Holocaust.

Optional:

- Raul Hilberg: Sources and Their Uses (The Holocaust and the History), pp. 5–11.

Week 3 - History of Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism: Why Germany?

What is anti-Judaism and what is wrong with the term anti-Semitism. Where to start digging. Centuries-old myths and their secular meanings. Radical changes of the 19th century and the Jew hatred in modern Germany. Types of Jewish responses. Arendt on Eichmann: the turning point in the perception of the Holocaust and its anti-Semitic link.

Reading

- Hannah Arendt: An Expert on the Jewish Question (Eichmann in Jerusalem), pp. 36–55.

Optional:

- Götz Aly: Anti-Semitism as a Political Force (Why the Germans? Why the Jews?), pp. 65–85.

Week 4 - Ideology and Propaganda of the Third Reich: How to Corrupt Decent People.

Hitler's worldview. What brought Hitler to power? Social, political, economic and cultural climate in Germany after the Great war. Role of anti-Semitism in Nazi campaigns. Voting for Hitler – voting for the Holocaust? Volksgemeinschaft. Compliance and coercion in the new regime.

Reading:

- Robert Gellately: The Gestapo and Social Co-operation—The Example of Political Denunciation (The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933–1945), pp. 129–158.
- Marion A. Kaplan: The Daily Lives of Jewish Children and Youth in the “Third Reich” (Between Dignity and Despair), pp. 94–118.

Optional:

- Bernard Wasserstein: *Camping (On the Eve—The Jews of Europe before the Second World War)*, pp. 387–408.

Week 5 - Which Solution is the Final One: Comprehending the Decision Making Process.

Historiography of the Holocaust. Intentionalists versus functionalists. Role of ideology. Specific functioning of the Nazi state. Wishes of the leaders and local initiatives. Participatory character of the Holocaust. Nazi prewar solutions of the Jewish question. Paradoxes of the “clear cut” racial definition. The November pogrom and its implications. Attitudes of the world countries.

Readings:

- Raul Hilberg: *Definition by Decree (The Destruction of the European Jews)*, pp. 25–38.
- Ian Kershaw: *Hitler’s Role in the “Final Solution” (Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution)*, pp. 89–116.

Optional:

- Christian Gerlach: *From Enforced Emigration to Territorial Schemes: 1933–41 (The Extermination of the European Jews)*, pp. 39–65.

Week 6 - Nazi Promised Lands and Its Enemies.

Nazi wartime solutions to the Jewish question. Racial and extermination policies in and outside the Reich. Late summer 1941 crisis in Germany: secret euthanasia program publicly addressed. Late summer 1941 crisis in the East: search for new mass-killing methods. Origins of the comprehensive extermination of the Jews. Purpose of the Wannsee conference.

Readings:

- Martin Gilbert: *20 January 1942: the Wannsee Conference (The Holocaust)*, pp. 280–293.
- Benno Müller-Hill: *Human Genetics and the Mass Murder of Jews, Gypsies, and Others (The Holocaust and the History)*, pp. 103–114.

Optional:

- Saul Friedländer: *September 1941–December 1941 (The Years of Extermination)*, pp. 261–293.

Week 7 - Terezín Ghetto and What Happened in Slovakia? A Case Study.

The purpose of the only ghetto in Central Europe. The International Red Cross' visit and its implications. The Family camp in Auschwitz. Unique features of the Slovakian Holocaust. The *Europa plan* and its failure. Blood for trucks proposal. Heroes with dirty hands. *Midterm Exam*

Readings:

- Ruth Bondy: *Games in the Shadow of the Crematoria* (Trapped), pp. 152–176.
- Ruth Bondy: *I Am Mater of My Last Moments* (Elder of the Jews–Jakob Edelstein of Theresienstadt), pp.428–447.

Optional:

- Livia Rothkirchen: *Czech and Slovak Wartime Leadership: Variants in Strategy and Tactics* (The Holocaust and the History), pp. 629–646.

Week 8 - Theory of morality after the Holocaust: Social Production of Evil.

Myth of the fall and myth of the civilizing process: innocent man corrupted by society, or moral society taming beasts? Social conformity and obedience to the norms. Social contract theories. Existentialism on freedom. Levinas on responsibility. Bauman on bureaucracy. Sources of moral norms. Decent people turned into mass killers. Reserve police battalion 101 in Goldhagen and Browning – a debate on the murderers' motivations.

Readings:

- Zygmunt Bauman: *The Ethics of Obedience* (Modernity and the Holocaust), pp. 151–168.
- Steven K. Baum: *Bystanders* (The Psychology of Genocide), pp. 153–177.

Optional:

- Christopher R. Browning: *German Killers–Behavior and Motivation in the Light of New Evidence* (Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers. German Killers), pp. 143–169.

Week 9 - Victim's Reactions: Types of Resistance

The origins of myths of contemptible Jewish behavior. Definition of Jewish resistance. Analysis of the situation: West and East. Similarities and differences. Important factors. The concept of *Amidah*. Unarmed and armed responses. *Judenrat* and its purposes. Arendt's accusation and how to respond to it.

Readings:

- Dan Michman: *Jewish Leadership in Extremis* (The Historiography of the Holocaust), pp. 319–340.
- Primo Levi: *The Grey Zone* (The Drowned and the Saved), pp. 22–51.

Optional:

- Yehuda Bauer: *The Neighbors* (The Death of the Shtetl), pp. 92–120.

Week 10 - Representation of Shoah in Art, Especially in Film.

The first Holocaust authors – diaries, testimonies, drawings, compositions of the victims and the survivors. Adorno on poetry after Auschwitz. Primo Levi and problems with adequate language. Historical and artistic Holocaust. The Holocaust movies – different perspectives, different agenda, different messages. Analysis of *Schindler's List*: its success and failure.

Readings:

- Omer Bartov: *Chambers of Horror* (Murder in Our Midst), pp. 157–175.
- *Schindler's List* (movie)

Week 11 - The Czech Holocaust: FORGOTTEN TRANSPORTS.

A rare documentary on a group of Czech Jewish women who survived their deportation to Estonia.

Week 12 - The Uniqueness and Normality of the Holocaust. Tentative Conclusion.

America and the Holocaust: before, during, and after. Holocaust link to the creation of the State of Israel. Aftermath: was there any meaning? Judaism and Christianity after the Holocaust. What makes modern genocides modern. What makes the Holocaust different from other mass violence. Holocaust deniers and other modern forms of anti-Semitism. Inhumanity as strictly human choice. Humanity as an everlasting project.

Readings:

- Tony Kushner: *Britain, the United States and the Holocaust: In Search of a Historiography* (The Historiography of the Holocaust), pp. 253–275.
- Helen P. Fry: *The Holocaust* (Christian-Jewish Dialogue–A Reader), pp. 43–73.

Optional:

- Omer Bartov: *Seeking the Roots of Modern Genocide* (Specter of Genocide), pp. 75–96.

Week 13 - Oral Presentations

Final Exam and Final Paper.

Readings:

REQUIRED READINGS:

1. The Course Reader
2. Other materials provided by the lecturer