

Multiple Perspectives on the Holocaust?

by Alan Singer, editor, *Social Science Docket*

Our goal is to have every issue of *Social Science Docket* include an essay on a key social studies concept or controversy in order to stimulate responses from readers and debate in the New Jersey and New York Councils for the Social Studies. This essay focuses on themes for examination in a unit on the World War II era effort by Nazi Germany to exterminate European Jewry and the possibility of multiple perspectives on the Holocaust. Prior to publication, the essay was circulated among social studies teachers at local meetings, through council newsletters and via e-mail. Teachers were asked to respond to the essay and discuss how they approach the topic. Selected responses are included at the end of the article.

Eli Wiesel challenges teachers to consider, “How do you teach events that defy knowledge, experiences that go beyond imagination? How do you tell children, big and small, that society could lose its mind and start murdering its own soul and its own father? How do you unveil horrors without offering at the same time some measure of hope?” (Totten and Feinberg, 1995, 323)

One way that social studies teachers have traditionally engaged students in examining and evaluating complex and sensitive issues is to present, and have them explore, multiple perspectives or points of view about a topic. But is it meaningful to present multiple perspectives on the “Holocaust” – the Nazi effort to exterminate European Jews during World War II?

While writing the New York State Great Irish Famine curriculum, Maureen Murphy and I grappled with a similar problem. Our solution, which we have discussed in a series of essays in *Social Science Docket* and *Social Education* (Murphy and Singer, 2001), is to use an essential or “big” question approach to studying about the Great Irish Famine and other controversial historical topics. For the Great Irish Famine curriculum, these questions include: What forces were shaping Ireland and the world before the Great Irish

Famine (e.g., the Colombian exchange, the Reformation in Europe, and Colonialism)? Was the Great Irish Famine an act of nature or an act of man? How did the Great Irish Famine change Ireland and the world? What is the legacy of the Great Irish Famine?

We never pretended that the famine did not take place or tried to minimize its impact on Ireland and the world. Neither did we condemn Great Britain for acts of genocide. Instead of presenting British action or inaction in Ireland during the famine as an example of genocide, we provided documentary evidence that makes it possible for students to examine the question from different perspectives and to arrive at different conclusions.

I believe a similar “essential questions” approach lends itself to studying about and understanding the Holocaust. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (1993) in Washington DC identifies questions frequently asked by visitors that can be the starting point for a study of the Holocaust. In my high school social studies and teacher education global history classes, over the years we have explored a series of pointed, controversial, and I believe historically important questions that can be answered from different perspectives. A discussion of these questions, listed below, forms the basis for the rest of this essay.

Questions from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC

1. What was the Holocaust?
2. Who were the Nazis?
3. Why did the Nazis want to kill large numbers of innocent people?
4. How did the Nazis carry out their policy of genocide?
5. How did the world respond to the Holocaust?

Essential Questions for Discussing the Holocaust

- What is Fascism?
- What is the relationship between Fascism and Nationalism?
- Why did Fascism come to power in certain countries and not others?
- Is there a relationship between Fascism, industrial capitalism and imperialism or Fascism and Communism?
- What is the relationship between Fascism and Nazism?
- Does one cause or do multiple causes explain the Nazi rise to power in Germany?
- Can one person, Adolph Hitler, be held solely or primarily responsible for Nazism, the Holocaust and World War II?
- Why did Nazi Germany target the Jews?
- What was the responsibility of other nations for creating the conditions for Fascism and Nazism and for permitting Hitler to gain and exploit power?
- Was acquiescence to Fascism and Nazism by individuals, groups and nations a form of complicity?
- What was the responsibility of individuals living in that era? Are all people capable of complicity?
- Can we generalize from the experience of a handful of Holocaust survivors, resisters, recorders and rescuers?
- Is the Holocaust a “singularity,” something so unique and horrible, that it can not be compared with any other historical event? How is the Holocaust similar or different from other genocides?
- Do we live in a world where the forces of good are aligned against the forces of evil (such as in the Star Wars epic) and the opposing sides are clearly defined?
- In today’s world, does either terrorism or repression equal genocide?

Multiple Perspectives On Fascism

The first group of essential questions on my list are all related to the problem of defining Fascism. I start with Fascism rather than Nazism for two reasons. Fascism develops in other countries besides Germany. If Nazism is a subset of Fascism, it helps us to understand its origins. Defining Fascism also challenges historians to explain why a particularly virulent anti-Semitic variety emerged and seized power in Germany in the intra-war years. The Nazis “dehumanized” Jews to justify their extermination. I think it is a serious historical and philosophical mistake to “dehumanize” Nazis or Germans in order to separate ourselves from complicity with or the possibility of similar behavior. Unfortunately, the perpetrators of the Holocaust were all too human.

A number of historians, activists and political thinkers have explored the emergence of Fascism in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century and they have reached very different conclusions about its fundamental nature. In 1935, the Communist International called Fascism “the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.” It accused the “ruling bourgeoisie” of using Fascist

movements to enforce “predatory measures against the working people,” to rally support “for an “imperialist war of plunder,” and as a means for “attacking the Soviet Union.”

While the Soviet and German leadership viewed their respective systems as fundamental opposites, Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (1951), argued that Fascism and Communism are actually kindred totalitarian responses to the collapse of the nation-state system in Europe. Arendt believed that in the absence of traditional institutions in the era after World War I, an unfortunate, unprincipled and unrestrained alliance emerged in certain countries between elites and a mass movement of rootless people with no stake in society (She calls them “atomized, isolated, individuals”). According to Arendt, this alliance was the basis of both Fascist and Communist movements. In post-war Germany, anti-Semitism represented an effort to resurrect a battered German nationalism and was central to the conditions that produced Fascism, transformed it into Nazism and led to World War II (165). During the Cold War era of the 1950s and 1960s, Arendt ideas about the connections between Fascism and Communism

became the dominant view in the United States (Schlesinger, 1949/1962).

The Age of Extremes

Eric Hobsbawm, author of *The Age of Extremes, A History of the World, 1914-1991* (1994), shares Arendt's view that Fascism emerged from a "collapse of the old regimes" (126). However, in his interpretation, anti-Semitism, Fascism and "totalitarianism" played only minor roles in events leading up to World War II. Hobsbawm argues that World War II was neither fought over the fate of European Jewry nor to spread or stop totalitarianism. Instead, it was a continuation of the imperialist conflagration of the first World War following a brief respite to rebuild, rearm and repopulate. According to Hobsbawm, the second round of war started when Germany was attacked by England and France because of Hitler's attempt to create a pan-German nation including territories that had been stripped away from the Germanic central powers at the Versailles peace conference in 1919 (Austria, the Sudentland in Czechoslovakia, Alsace-Lorraine in France, and western Prussia in Poland). In this interpretation, the war would have taken place as soon as Germany had sufficiently recovered from World War I, regardless of the emergence of Hitler or Fascism.

That said, Hobsbawm believes that Fascism was successful in Germany because of very specific circumstances: there was "a mass of disenchanting, disoriented, and discontented citizens who no longer knew where their loyalties lay;" an oppositional socialist movement that appeared to threaten social revolution; and, nationalist resentment against the post-war treaties. He notes that Fascism made no progress in Britain, despite that country's endemic anti-Semitism, because its traditional conservative rightwing was able to maintain control after World War I.

Hobsbawm rejects (127-129) both the traditional liberal claim that Fascism was a social revolution from the right and the orthodox Marxist argument endorsed by the Communist International that Fascism represents the ultimate expression of "monopoly capitalism." Hobsbawm claims that Hitler quickly eliminated party factions that took the "revolutionary" rhetoric of National Socialism seriously and that German capital would have preferred more traditional conservative forces, even though it was able to come to

terms with Fascism once Hitler had achieved power. He concludes that Fascism was no more inherent in monopoly capital than the American New Deal or British labor governments, and as a result, disappeared with the end of the world crisis in 1945.

Mein Kampf

One of the most surprising things I have read in recent years is a 1933 *New York Times* book review of Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Essentially James Gerard of *The Times* gave it a positive review. Gerard argued that "(T)hose who would solve the riddle of Hitlerism and the present extraordinary attitude of the German people must search the history of Germany. . . Hitler could not have attained such power unless he represented the thoughts and aspirations of a majority of the population." The most startling section is toward the end of the review. According to Gerard, "Hitler is doing much for Germany; his unification of the Germans, his destruction of communism, his training of the young, his creation of a Spartan State animated by patriotism, his curbing of parliamentary government so unsuited to the German character; his protection of the right of private property are all good; and, after all, what the Germans do in their own territory is their own business, except for one thing – *the persecution and practical expulsion of the Jews*" (italics added). In other words, Fascism is not that bad, except for Hitler's unfortunate willingness "in his rise to power" to take "advantage of this prejudice."

I was raised as a Jew in the years after World War II and was taught that there was something unique and twisted about the German "national character" that brought Hitler to power and produced Nazism and the Holocaust (My father, who had close relatives exterminated by the Nazis, would not allow my younger brother and me to buy "flower power" Volkswagens because of their origins in Germany during the Nazi era). This position was supported by the work of Louis Snyder, an historian at my alma mater, the City College of New York. In *Hitler and Nazism* (1961), Snyder cites A. J. P. Taylor, who argued that "(t)he history of the Germans is a history of extremes. It contains everything except moderation . . ." (39). In addition, Snyder claims that there are four "basic facts" where "historians do not differ." "The Germans were politically weak even before Hitler. Hitler exploited the beliefs and fears of a frustrated people. His clear purpose was to destroy European

civilization and replace it with a barbarian empire. The Germans accepted him as the Messiah for whom they were awaiting. This political monster brought disaster and ruin both to Germany and the world” (40-41).

Today, as an historian and a social studies teacher, I have come to largely agree with Hobsbawm’s assessment that Fascism, Nazism and the Holocaust grew out of specific historical circumstances after the first World War and are not tied to anything that is specifically German. I think this view is supported by a telling quotation from a speech by Winston Churchill where he said, “I have always said that if Great Britain were defeated in war I hoped we should find a Hitler to lead us back to our rightful position among the nations. . . . He (Hitler) embodied the revolt of Germany against the hard fortunes of war . . . Adolph Hitler is Fuehrer because he exemplifies and enshrines the will of Germany. . . I will not pretend that if I had to choose between Communism and Nazism, I would choose Communism.”

As a social studies teacher, I found a useful document for teaching about the “climate” of the intra-war years in Europe was William Butler Yeats’ poem, “The Second Coming” (www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~benjamin/316kfall/316ktexts/yeatssecond.html). Yeats believed that World War I had unleashed the worst of humanity, signaling the arrival of the anti-Christ and the approach of Armageddon. Curiously, in the late 1920s and the 1930s, Yeats, who was a staunchly anti-British Irish nationalist, became sympathetic with the Fascist cause.

The idea that social change can be experienced as a profound, unsettling disaster, and unleash destructive forces, is also a major theme in Chinua Achebe’s book about European colonialism in Nigeria, *Things Fall Apart*, and much of the current discussion of the impact of globalization on non-Western countries. Students can discuss what they think would happen to political, economic and social institution in the United States if our way of life suddenly seemed to be falling apart.

Why Germany Targeted The Jews

If Fascism, even its Nazi variety, is not an inherently German evil, we have to find another explanation for the direction it took in Germany. Many people look at the 19th century music and ideology espoused by Richard Wagner and others as prophetic of what was to develop. In 1881, Wagner wrote, “I

regard the Jewish race as the born enemy of pure humanity and everything that is noble in it; . . . perhaps I am the last German who knows how to stand up . . . against the Judaism that is already getting control of everything.” In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described Jews as “a parasite in the body of other nations.” Lucy Dawidowicz, author of *The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945* (1975), argues that “the idea of the mass annihilation of the Jews” had already been foreshadowed by “apocalyptic-minded anti-Semites during the nineteenth century” (3) and claims that “a line of anti-Semitic descent from Martin Luther to Adolph Hitler is easy to draw” (23). Paul Johnson, in *A History of the Jews* (1987), describes Luther’s 1543 pamphlet *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* (On the Jews and their Lies) “the first work of modern anti-Semitism, and a giant step forward on the road to the Holocaust” (242). In the pamphlet, Luther urged that Jewish “synagogues should be set on fire, and whatever is left should be buried in dirt so that no one may ever be able to see a stone or cinder of it.” Luther was not content with a verbal assault on Germany’s Jews. He was instrumental in having them expelled from Saxony in 1537 and his followers sacked the Berlin synagogue in 1572.

However, I do not think charges of traditional German anti-Semitism offer a sufficient explanation of what took place. The Germanic world also produced a series of world-class Jewish intellectuals who were highly respected and largely assimilated. These included people as diverse in achievement as Heinrich Heine, Felix Mendelssohn, Karl Marx, Gustav Mahler, Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein. At the same time, other European countries had histories of anti-Semitism and they did not try to systematically exterminate their Jewish citizens. Jews were expelled and executed by the inquisition in Spain at the end of the 15th century. In the 1880s, there were violent anti-Jewish pogroms (riots) across western Russia. In the 1890s, the French military framed, convicted and imprisoned Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer, blaming him for France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Few literary works by prominent authors are as overtly anti-Semitic as England’s William Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*, where he describes the hardness of Shylocks’s “Jewish heart” or Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist*, where the miserly Fagan is continually referred to as “the Jew.” I think a number of developments had to come together to make Jews

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particularly vulnerable in Nazi Germany rather than in these other countries.

First and foremost was the impact of Germany's defeat in World War I, the one-sided Treaty of Versailles that forced Germany to pay war reparations, and the inflation, unemployment and depression that wracked the economy in the post-war years. As early as 1916, as the German military and government sought an explanation for impending defeat, Jews were targeted. Later, the Nazis Party accused Jews of betraying Germany during the war and causing its defeat, promoting leftist revolutionary movements, and mismanaging the German economy.

As conditions grew more desperate, many Germans (Dawidowicz argues the vast number) were willing to blame a vulnerable scapegoat for their misery. Much of what we know about Nazi ideas comes from *Mein Kampf* (My Battle), written by Adolph Hitler while he was imprisoned in 1923 and 1924 for leading a failed coupe. In this book, Hitler excoriates Jews for all of Germany's troubles. For me, the key question is not what Hitler wrote or why, but "What conditions made it possible for his ideas to receive such a high measure of acceptance?" In November, 1933, the National Socialist (Nazi) Party received 33 percent of the vote in parliamentary elections and in January, 1933, Hitler, as the representative of the government's largest party, took office as Chancellor. Students also need to consider whether the countries that foisted the post-war treaty on Germany and ignored its plight in the 1920s share responsibility for what happened.

The Jewish population of Germany was both large enough and small enough to be targeted and scapegoated in a time of crisis and dislocation. It was large enough that most Germans had some familiarity with Jews. It was small enough that it could be "removed" without major social dislocations. In 1933, Jews made up roughly 1 percent of the total population of Germany. Approximately 300,000 Jews fled Germany by 1939, while an estimated 200,000 German and Austrian Jews died in the "final solution." Students need to learn that other groups, especially socialists, communists, intellectual and religious dissenters, "Gypsies", Poles, the handicapped and homosexuals, were stereotyped and victimized as well.

A significant number of Jews were socially and economically prominent and some, especially Polish-Jewish immigrants, were distinctive because of their

clothing and cultural practices. Small size, occasional prominence and distinctiveness made it possible to identify and scapegoat Jews for Germany's troubles. If the Jewish population had been significantly larger or less easy to identify, Fascism still would have triumphed in Germany, but Jews might not have been targeted in the same way.

One of the paradoxes of European anti-Semitism was that Jews could be attacked at the same time as monopoly capitalists and international communists. Hitler charged that Marxism was "Jewish doctrine." Some people identifiable as Jews were prominent in each group. In the popular mind, Jews represented the alien other, the outsider, the non-Christian. In a society experiencing sharp dislocation, Jews symbolized the forces (greedy capitalists, traitorous, atheistic socialists, modernization) threatening the traditional way of life and were easy to blame. A similar strand of anti-Semitism has been identified in populist rhetoric in the United States in the 1890s.

There was no Jewish nation-state to intervene in defense of Jews and respond to anti-Semitism, similar to Slavic Russia's support for Slavic Serbia at the start of World War I.

Jewish Losses in World War II

Country	Pre-war Jewish pop.	Jewish Loses	Percent Loses
Poland	3,300,000	2,800,000	85%
USSR (Nazi occupied)	2,100,000	1,500,000	71.4%
Czech.	315,000	260,000	82.5%
France	300,000	90,000	30.0%
Austria	60,000	40,000	66.6%
Italy	57,000	15,000	26.3%

It is important to remember that the "Final Solution," the plan to exterminate European Jewry, was not implemented until 1941, eight years after the Nazis came to power in Germany. Only 2.5% of the Jews who were exterminated by the Nazis were German. The rest were people, like my father's family, who were caught on the battlefields of Eastern Europe or trapped in occupied countries.

Individual And Collective Responses

As a child growing up in the 1950s learning about the history of my own people, and later as a teenager, I was angered and also devastated by the knowledge that Eastern European Jews, including my relatives, had

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died in the death camps of Nazi Germany. Knowledge of oppression did not satisfy me. I felt humiliated and I wanted to scream out, “Why didn’t we fight back?” What finally helped me come to terms with the Holocaust was reading about Jewish resistance in Leon Uris’ (1961) book about the Warsaw Ghetto and the creation and defense of the State of Israel. I realize that the key for my coming to terms with the 20th century history of Jews was recognition of human resistance. Even as an adult, I laughed uncontrollably during the movie *Genghis Cohn* (1995), when a Jewish comedian, moments before his execution by a firing squad, tells his Nazi murderers to “kush mir in tokhes” (kiss my ass). Sometimes “chutzpah” is the only defiance that is possible.

The book, *Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl* (Frank and Pressler, 1995) touches readers partly because of her innocence and normalcy, but also partly because of her decision, just before her family was captured, “to publish a book called *The Secret Annex*,” based on her diary, that would help document wartime suffering in The Netherlands. The idea of keeping a diary and using it as a way to maintain our dignity and fight back against our oppressors is the only way most of us are able to confront such enormous horror.



Anne Frank House, Amsterdam

Yet as an historian, I recognize that most Jewish resistance to Nazi oppression was symbolic and usually it was futile. We learn much about the human spirit from Anne Frank, the Warsaw ghetto fighters, the actions of German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed for participating in a plot to assassinate Hitler, the efforts of diplomats such as Rauol Wallenburg (Sweden) and Hirokio Sugihara (Japan) to

help Jews escape, acts of decency (and self-interest) by people like Oskar Schindler, and the collective courage of the people of Le Chambon in France. However, how much should it be the focal point in a history-based social studies curriculum? We often have students read and discuss the statement on individual choices by Pastor Martin Niemoeller. But what does it explain about the causes of Nazism? Was the Holocaust simply the result of the failure of individuals to act while there was still time?

First They Came for the Jews

by Martin Niemoeller

First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the Communists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me
and there was no one left
to speak out for me.

Meanwhile, other acts of organized resistance which had a much greater impact on the war and made significant contributions to the defeat of Nazi Germany and its allies are largely ignored in the curriculum because these freedom fighters believed in communism. In France, Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia, communists battled against great odds long after official government forces had surrendered and began to collaborate in the extermination of Jewish citizens. Meanwhile in Asia, Mao Ze-dung and Ho Chi Minh led communist revolutionary armies (supported by western aid, weapons and advisors) against the Japanese. Facing History and Ourselves (1994), an organization that I greatly respect, has produced *Holocaust and Human Behavior*, a 576 page resource guide on the Holocaust that includes over fifty pages on “Bystanders and Rescuers.” Communist involvement in the resistance is never mentioned.

The politics of the Cold War and its influence on the social studies curriculum have meant a series of

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errors of omission or emphasis as textbooks try to distinguish between the “good guys” (The U.S.) and the “bad guys” (the Soviet Union and the communists). Prentice Hall’s *World History: Patterns of Civilization* (Beers, 1991) has a sub-section on “The Holocaust Revealed” that explains that while “the Allies had received reports about Hitler’s attacks on Jews,” it was not until “Allied troops marched into Germany” that “they learned the full horror of his campaign of genocide” (708).

While on some level this statement is true, on other levels it is at least misleading. Anne Frank’s diary says that the family learned of the mass execution of Jews from British radio broadcasts in October, 1942. As early as July, 1942, the United States State Department began inquiring into the massacre of Jews in Eastern Europe (Wyman, 1984: 24). Throughout the war, *The New York Times* reported on Nazi Germany’s attacks on Jews, though most reports were consigned to small pieces on the inside pages. In October, 1941, it published a story on the murder of over 10,000 Jews in Galicia (Poland) based on reports from Hungarian army officers. In May, 1942, it reported that German troops had executed more than 100,000 Jews in the Baltic states (Wyman, 1984: 20-21). Also in May, 1942, the Jewish Labor Bund in Poland delivered an extensive report on the mass murder of Polish Jews to the Polish Government-in-exile in London. Information from the report, including the estimate of 700,000 casualties, was broadcast by the BBC on June 2, 1942. It was also the basis for a United Press release sent to the United States and the story appeared in different forms in the *Seattle Times*, *Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. (Wyman, 21-22).

In 1944, the United States refused to bomb the rail lines being used to transport Jews to their death in Auschwitz. The military dismissed the idea as “impractical,” yet the United States bombed the area around Auschwitz on a number of occasions, including an attack on August 20, 1944 that released over one thousand bombs in the vicinity (Facing History, 1994: 407).

Prentice Hall also credits the United States, Great Britain and France with helping Germany rebuild after the war, while the Soviet Union is accused of wanting to punish them, but the willingness of the West to rehabilitate and use former Nazis during the Cold War is never mentioned (715). For example, Werner Von Braun, a scientist in charge of the German war-time

rocketry program was later given a similar position in the United States. In another post-war action that bears scrutiny, the United States negotiated an agreement with the head of Germany’s Russian espionage unit and paid former Nazi agents millions of dollars a year to spy on its war-time ally. In the 1950s, this group was assigned to create West Germany’s espionage agency (Martin, 2002).



Holocaust Monument, Paris, France

Even claims of victimization can be problematic. While Greek resistance fighters battled the Nazis even when villages were threatened with massacre and the Soviet Union withdrew its forces and factories east in order to continue the fight, France and The Netherlands quickly surrendered rather than risk destruction and most of their citizens passively collaborated with Nazi occupiers. One French town, Oradour-sur-Glane near Limoges, had a particularly interesting history. On Saturday, June 10, 1944, 4 days after the allied invasion at Normandy, a German SS Division entered the town without warning, rounded up its population, and slaughtered 642 people, including 205 children (*The New York Times*, 1944: 1:4; Hébras, 1994). No one is quite sure of the reason. Town residents had no known ties with resistance forces. Some chroniclers

suspect the Nazis simply made a mistake and attacked the wrong village. Another possibility is that the German occupying army wanted to make a statement to the French people that despite D-Day the war and occupation were not over.

When local people rebuilt Oradour-sur-Glane after World War II, they decided to use a neighboring site, and keep the ruins of the original town as a tribute to the people who died there and as a memorial to the horror of Nazi occupation. However, the memorial presents only one portion of the town's involvement in World War II. Why were the residents of Oradour-sur-Glane living peacefully on that Saturday in the middle of the bloodiest war in human history? The only answer I can conceive of is that they had sought safety and temporarily succeeded in withdrawing from the war by cooperating with the occupying forces.

Lessons of the Holocaust

The theme of the October, 1995 (v. 59, n. 6) issue of *Social Education* was "Teaching About the Holocaust." In an introduction to the issue, Michael Simpson of the National Council for the Social Studies wrote: "Effective teaching about genocide must offer students more than the sensational facts and dates of atrocities. They need to understand the processes that can result in genocide, as well as the human forces that can prevent or resist it" (321). The key point here is that students and citizens need to understand the lessons of the Holocaust in order to "prevent or resist" genocide in the future. However, understanding the Holocaust, or even defining genocide, have not been simple tasks.

The word *genocide* was coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. Lemkin combined the Greek word for tribe, *genos*, with a Latin suffix designating a killer or destroyer, *cide*. In 1951, the United Nations approved (with the agreement of the United States), a "Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide." The Convention broadly defined genocide as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, such as: a) killing members of the group; b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) forcibly

transferring children of the group to another group." This definition has stirred up continuing debate because of the difficulty of proving *intent*, and because it expands the notion of genocide to include other kinds of victimization. For example, under this definition, Britain's decision to limit food aid during the Great Irish Famine, European involvement in the African Slave Trade and the decimation of the native population of the Americas by old world diseases during the Colombian exchange probably would not qualify as genocidal actions despite the magnitude of the devastation and the clear benefit some groups received from what happened.

In 1979, the President's Commission on the Holocaust described it as "a crime unique in the annals of human history, different not only in the quantity of violence – the sheer numbers killed – but in its manner and purpose as a mass criminal enterprise organized by the state against defenseless civilian populations" (330). Many groups that promote Holocaust education programs and memorialize its victims share this view. A problem, however, is if the Holocaust is a "unique" occurrence, an historical "singularity," it limits the broader lessons that can be drawn from understanding Nazi efforts to exterminate European Jewry. A very different view of the Holocaust was offered by Ali Mazrui of SUNY-Binghamton during debate over the New York State Curriculum of Inclusion in 1990-1991. He argued that "(w)hat was distinctive about Nazi Germany was that it was an extreme case of something much more widespread in the Western world – racism and a sense of cultural superiority. Hitler was the worst case of something which – in milder forms – is still rampant in the Western world. Racial and cultural arrogance" (Cornblith, 1995: 113-118). Mazrui also argued that the Greek-derived word 'holocaust' should remain a generic metaphor applicable to the experience of other people who were victims of atrocities. These positions were widely and sharply attacked by political leaders, at public meetings and in the press.

Holocaust survivors and educators have adopted the slogan, "Never Forget." While collective memory is vital, I believe it is an insufficient goal. In *Survival at Auschwitz*, Holocaust survivor Primo Levi (1996) writes that in order to stay alive, an inmate must quickly accept that "heir ist kein warum," "there is no why here" (29). As students, teachers and historians explore multiple perspectives on the Holocaust, our objective must always be to ask "Why?"

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William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice"

One of the most blatant examples of anti-Semitism in the western literary tradition is William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The causes of anti-Semitism are quickly blamed on Shylock and the Jews. In Act 1, Scene 3, Shylock tells a Christian who wants to borrow money, "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you." Later, in an aside to the audience, Shylock declares "I hate him (Antonio) for he is a Christian, . . . He lends out money gratis and brings down the rate of usance here with us in Venice. If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him. He hates our sacred nation, and he rails, even there where merchants most do congregate, on me, my bargains and my well-won thrift, which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe, if I forgive him!"

To the modern reader, there appears to be some effort to give Shylock a human face, but it is a face much distorted by his experience. In a famous soliloquy, Shylock declares "Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

As a high school student I assumed, and I believe my teachers suggested, that Shakespeare included these passages to show the humanity of Shylock and the Jews. Of course, this passage only evokes sympathy if the reader assumes that Shylock is human and has been wronged. Otherwise, it is falsehood and vainglory on his part. Shylock claims the same physiology, passions and rights as a Christian, which seems to us to be reasonable, but probably appeared outrageous to Shakespeare's 17th century audience. They were more inclined to agree with Antonio who issues an eternal and unchanging condemnation of "the Jew" when he addresses the court, in Act III, Scene, 1. "You may as well go stand upon the beach and bid the main flood bate his usual height; you may as well use question with the wolf Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb; . . . you may as well do anything most hard,