

SYLLABUS

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Historiography of Holocaust Testimonies

Teachers Guide



A still from the testimony of Edith P. (HVT-417) from the collection of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.

What Is the Role of Survivor Testimony and Voices of Victims in the Study of the Holocaust?

Unit Overview

We live in what the historian Annette Wieviorka has called “the era of the witness.” Today, Holocaust testimonies are prominent and venerated sources in popular culture, education, and historical scholarship. It is nearly impossible to envision the study of the Holocaust without survivor testimony. But testimonies and the voices of victims did not always play this prominent role—for many years, they were dismissed or marginalized in both postwar trials of Nazi perpetrators and historical scholarship.

This set of materials invites students to explore the contributions of survivor testimony and the voices of victims to the study of the Holocaust. What can we learn from the massive documentation of the Holocaust generated by Nazi officials? How has the inclusion of testimony changed our understanding of the Holocaust? What are the challenges involved in working with testimony as a historical source?

By engaging these questions, students deepen their understanding of the Holocaust, examine how historians construct narratives and arguments, and discern how different types of sources support different aspects of historical understanding. Students analyze knowledge gained from German government documents and from individual witness accounts and survivor testimonies. They explore the value and limits of both types of sources. To focus student inquiry, all documents in this unit pertain to the history of Nazi concentration camps.

Students also explore broader questions that emerge when documenting the aftermath of mass violence: How does our own historical context influence our understanding of history? How do we center the voices and experiences of survivors while recognizing both the persistence and malleability of memory? How do we avoid viewing survivors solely through the lens of victimhood? What is the relationship between history, memory, and justice?

This unit can be incorporated into **European History** and **World History** courses as well as **Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights** electives. It can also be used in courses that introduce students to **historical research**.

The time needed for the unit is flexible. In its entirety, it could take **up to six 40-minute class sessions**. Alternatively, teachers could **choose individual elements from the unit for individual class periods**. Please see the suggested instructional sequence below.

Background knowledge: Before studying this unit, students should have a strong understanding of the Holocaust and the Nazi concentration camp system. Two digital resource repositories are especially helpful: the educational materials provided by the [United States Holocaust Memorial](#)

[Museum](#) and [The Nazi Concentration Camps](#) website for high school students, created by the historian Nikolaus Wachsmann and based on his 2015 award-winning book, [KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps](#).

Pedagogical Approach

This is a historiography-based curriculum unit—it invites students to explore how the inclusion of testimonies and voices of victims in Holocaust scholarship has changed over time and how this has expanded our understanding of the nature and effects of the Holocaust.

One of the key questions in historiographical debates about the Holocaust has been whether survivor testimony and other firsthand witness accounts can be considered valid sources of historical evidence. In this unit, we explore how the gradual inclusion of the voices of victims has affected historical writing on concentration camps.

Teachers receive an overview of the relevant historiographical debate, a document set for students, a rationale for what is included in the document set, and strategies that we have found helpful while working with these types of materials in high school classrooms and research settings.

Students analyze brief, scaffolded excerpts from historians' works to examine what claims historians have made and how they have used different types of sources to support these claims. Students also study the historians' context, perspectives, and views about the process of writing history.

This approach is designed to complement students' work with primary sources and engage students with a fuller understanding of how historians construct knowledge and how this knowledge changes over time. To learn more about our approach, please explore our [research findings](#) and the principles of design of this curricular model, which we are calling a "Historiography-Based Inquiry."

Materials

Historiographical Signposts

Document Packet

Guiding Questions

Learning Objectives

- Analyze how official government documents from Nazi Germany and its allies made it possible to reconstruct timelines, key events, and other aspects of the history of Nazi concentration camps; identify the value and limits of these documents as historical sources.
- Examine how the inclusion of survivor testimony and voices of victims has changed the study of the Holocaust, focusing on the example of Nazi concentration camps.
- Analyze how historians construct arguments and how they interpret different types of sources to support their claims.

- Identify some challenges of working with testimonies as historical sources and begin articulating relationships between history, memory, and justice.
- Recognize that this unit provides a small window into a complex history and formulate questions to learn more through further research.

Document Packet: Content and Rationale

In this unit, students analyze brief excerpts from the works of three historians: **Martin Broszat**, **Saul Friedländer**, and **Christopher R. Browning**. The document packet contains excerpts from the following works.

- (1) **Martin Broszat’s 1965 essay “The Concentration Camps: 1933–1945.”** This was one of the earliest studies of the Nazi camp system. Broszat initially wrote it as an expert report for the prosecution in the trial of Auschwitz personnel, which took place in Frankfurt between 1961 and 1963. His goal was to describe the functioning of the Nazi camp system, and he based his analysis on a massive collection of Nazi government documents, including those that had served as evidence in the [Nuremberg Trials](#). Broszat’s study functioned as the standard in Nazi concentration camp scholarship for several decades. He analyzed the history and evolution of Nazi camps from their beginnings until the end of the war. Excerpts from Broszat’s study in the Document Packet highlight his analysis of Nazi reports, which describe barracks in Auschwitz and provide summaries of the numbers of prisoners in the final years of the war. These excerpts aim to engage students in exploring what aspects of Holocaust history can be analyzed with sources created by the perpetrators. Broszat’s analysis also offers an example of a text deliberately written without the voices of victims.
- (2) **Saul Friedländer’s 2007 book *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*.** This is one of the most influential works in the field of Holocaust history. In 1987, Friedländer exchanged a series of public letters with Broszat in the context of a broader debate among German historians known as the *Historikerstreit*. Among other things, Friedländer criticized Broszat for excluding the voices of Jewish victims from his historical writing. In 1997, Friedländer published the first volume of *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution*, focusing on the 1930s. He published the second volume, *The Years of Extermination*, in 2007, focusing on the Holocaust. In these two volumes, Friedländer proposed what he called an integrated history of the Holocaust: a history that juxtaposed a variety of sources and the complex events and developments in Germany and other countries, and one that emphasized the central importance of the experiences and voices of victims. Excerpts from Friedländer’s 2007 book aim to engage students in exploring how the inclusion of the voices of victims humanizes the historical narrative and challenges readers to grapple with the enormity and complexity of the Holocaust.
- (3) **Christopher R. Browning’s 2010 book *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*.** This is a study by an eminent Holocaust historian, best known for his analysis of Nazi perpetrators in his 1992 book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion*

101 and the Final Solution in Poland. In *Remembering Survival*, Browning analyzed testimonies given by 292 survivors to reconstruct the history of Nazi slave-labor camps in the town of Starachowice, Poland. This history could not have been recovered without testimonies because of the extreme dearth of wartime sources about the Starachowice camps. Excerpts from this book seek to engage students in analyzing how a historian interprets testimonies to recover and corroborate factual historical information about the Holocaust.

We provide excerpts and scaffolding to support **two rounds of classroom discussion** about the work of these historians.

To support the first discussion round—**Context and Perspective**—we provide a one-page introduction for each historian, with biographical and contextual notes, and one to two Context and Perspective excerpts in which the historian articulates their stance, goals, or methodology.

To support the second discussion round—**Argumentation and Use of Sources**—we provide two to five Argumentation and Use of Sources excerpts for each historian. These excerpts exemplify how the historian interprets historical sources as they construct their narrative.

While we encourage the use of the document packet in its entirety, this structure also invites teachers to make choices about which texts to share with students.

Footnote Tracing

In the document packet, each excerpt from a historian’s work is preceded by a contextual headnote and followed by a note called Historical Evidence and Sources. This note focuses on the historian’s footnotes—how they documented their sources. Whenever possible, we provide links to digitized versions of the original sources to help students engage with footnote tracing: consulting and analyzing sources cited by historians.

Suggested Instructional Sequence

To engage students in thinking about the challenges of constructing historical knowledge, we have developed the following instructional sequence in our practice. It combines our individual perspectives—those of a historian, a history education scholar, and an instructional coach and curriculum leader.

We invite you to adapt this sequence to your goals and your students’ needs.

1. First, **familiarize yourself with the broad outlines of this historiography** by reading the Historiographical Signposts document provided with this unit. It includes suggestions for further reading if you would like to learn more.
2. **Decide** whether your students have enough background knowledge to work with these materials or will need additional information to supplement their existing knowledge.
3. **Introduce the topic and the central question** of this Historiography-Based Inquiry: “What is the role of survivor testimonies and voices of victims in the study of the

Holocaust?” **Ask students to express their initial responses** to the central question **and explain why they hold these views** (in pairs, small groups, or writing). Please note that we use the phrase “survivor testimonies and voices of victims” broadly to indicate the victims of the Nazis—those who survived the Holocaust and those who did not.

4. **Hand out the Document Packet and Guiding Questions.**
5. **FIRST DISCUSSION ROUND: Context and Perspective**
 - a. **Introduce the first historian, Martin Broszat.**
 - b. **Ask students to read the Introduction** to Broszat and identify elements of his experiences and context that may be relevant to understanding his work.
 - c. **Guide students in reading the Context and Perspective** excerpt from Broszat’s essay to understand what he aimed to achieve in writing the “Concentration Camps, 1933–1945.”
 - d. **Guide students in analyzing the Introduction** documents and **Context and Perspective** excerpts for **Friedländer** and **Browning**.
 - e. **Facilitate the first round of whole-class discussion:**
 - How do these three historians differ in their approaches to the testimonies and voices of Holocaust victims?
 - Are there similarities between them?
 - How could each historian’s context help us interpret their writing?

Note: Teachers with limited time may choose to end the unit after the Context and Perspective discussion round.

6. **SECOND DISCUSSION ROUND: Historians’ Argumentation and Use of Sources**
 - a. **Guide students in analyzing the Argumentation and Use of Sources** excerpts for **Broszat**. Use the provided Guiding Questions document, adjusting it for your students. These excerpts engage students in analyzing how the historian makes claims and supports them with historical evidence and sources. If your students are new to this type of analysis, model close reading for them by reading aloud and sharing your own thoughts and questions as you read. You can also take time to explore the linked primary sources to engage students in analyzing the original sources quoted by the historian.
 - b. **Guide students in analyzing the Argumentation and Use of Sources** excerpts for **Friedländer** and **Browning**.
 - c. **Facilitate the second round of whole-class discussion:**
 - What are the claims each historian is making about the Holocaust and concentration camps?
 - How do these historians use sources to support their claims?
 - How do they differ in what evidence they use and how they interpret it?
 - Given that we studied only brief excerpts from each of these historians, what else would you like to learn about their work to better understand the history of the Holocaust?

7. **Facilitate a concluding discussion to help students synthesize their learning:**

- a. What is the role of survivor testimonies and the voices of victims in the study of the Holocaust? How do they change our understanding of this history?
- b. What are some challenges of working with testimonies to understand the Holocaust?
- c. What can we learn about Nazi concentration camps from reports and other documents written by Nazi officials?
- d. What is the value and what are the limits of analyzing historical documents created by the perpetrators of genocide?
- e. How can scholars center the voices of victims of genocide? What connections do you see between history, memory, and justice?
- f. What else would you like to learn to answer this unit's central question more fully?