**Holocaust Memorial Day – information for staff**

**This information covers the key information about the Holocaust and about Holocaust Memorial Day. Please let me know if you have any questions or if you need any support discussing this with your tutor group. I have also included some common misconceptions; please be careful if discussing these. Please also direct students to the reading list and display put together by the library:**

<https://collections.follettsoftware.com/collection/5fcd8fb7ff4c730012f33f8f>

**What was the Holocaust?**

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its allies and collaborators. The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were ‘racially superior’ and that the Jews were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community. During this time, the Nazis also targeted other groups because of their perceived racial or biological inferiority, such as Roma, people with disabilities, some Slavic people, Soviet prisoners of war and black people. Other groups that were persecuted included Communists, Socialists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and homosexuals.

From the time they assumed power in 1933, the Nazis used propaganda, persecution and legislation to deny human and civil rights to Jews. They used centuries of anti-Semitism as their foundation. In 1933, the Jewish population of Europe stood at over nine million. Most European Jews lived in countries that Nazi Germany would occupy or influence during the Second World War.

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Germany invaded Poland, subjecting approximately two million Polish Jews to violence and forced labour. Shortly after the occupation, Polish Jews were confined to particular neighbourhoods, known as ‘gehttos’. Living conditions in the ghettos were appalling; this was a deliberate attempt by the Nazis to cause the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews. This approachb was repeated across Eastern Europe in other countries occupied by the Nazis.

In 1941, the ‘Final Solution’ began. This was the attempt to murder all of the Jews in Europe. Death squads called *Einsatzgruppen* swept through Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, killing Jews by firing squad. By the end of 1941, the first extermination camp, Chelmno in Poland, was established. Extermination camps were used on an enormous scale between 1941 and 1945. By the end of the war, the Nazis and their allies and collaborators killed nearly two out of every three European Jews.

**Why is it called the Holocaust? What else is it called?**

The word *Holocaust* is a word of Greek origin, meaning ‘sacrifice by fire’. The word refers specifically to the murder of Europe’s Jews. This is not intended to ignore or belittle the suffering of others but, in fact, to achieve the opposite. Using ‘Holocaust’ as a catch-all term for Nazi persecution can obscure the varying experiences of the different victim groups.

However, Holocaust Memorial Day encourages remembrance of the millions of people killed in genocide across the world, not just in the Holocaust alone.

In Hebrew, the Holocaust is referred to as The Shoah or Ha-Shoah, meaning ‘the catastrophe’.

**What is the purpose of Holocaust Memorial Day?**

The aim of Holocaust Memorial Day is to educate young people from all backgrounds about the Holocaust and the important lessons to be learned for today. The day encourages remembrance in a world scarred by genocide. On this day we remember the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, alongside the millions of other people killed under Nazi persecution and in genocides that followed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

The Holocaust threatened the fabric of civilisation and genocide must still be resisted every day. Our world often feels fragile and vulnerable and we cannot be complacent. Prejudice and the language of hatred must be challenged by all.

Every year, people come together to learn more about the past and take action to create a safer future. The aim is for people to learn more, empathise more and do more. Together we bear witness for those who endured genocide, and honour the survivors and all those whose lives were changed beyond recognition.

**Why 27 January?**

27 January marks the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp.

**How do people in Israel remember the Holocaust?**

Yom Hashoah was established in Israel in 1959 by law. It falls on the 27th of the Jewish month of Nissan, chosen because it is the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. This is a day set aside for Jews to remember the Holocaust. Yom Hashoah ceremonies include the lighting of candles for Holocaust victims and listening to the stories of survivors. Religious ceremonies include prayers such as Kaddish for the dead and the El Maleh Rahamim, a memorial prayer.

**Common misconceptions and explanations as to why these are incorrect:**

1. **The term ‘Holocaust’ refers to all victims of Nazi persecution – incorrect because...**

Although certain groups other than Jews (including Sinti and Roma, people with disabilities, Soviet prisoners of war and Polish elites) were victims of Nazi mass murder and many others were persecuted, only Jews were targeted for complete extermination. Historians therefore employ the term ‘Holocaust’ specifically to describe the murder of Europe’s Jews. This is not intended to ignore or belittle the suffering of others but, in fact, to achieve the opposite. Using ‘Holocaust’ as a catch-all term for Nazi persecution can obscure the varying experiences of the different victim groups.

1. **Hitler alone was responsible for the Holocaust – incorrect because...**

Hitler was indeed ultimately responsible. However, he presided over a chaotic system of government in which rival individuals and institutions competed for influence. German officials across occupied Europe were actively involved in the decision-making process which led to the Holocaust. Similarly, its perpetration involved not only the SS but also many other agencies who knowingly made the murders possible, such as the civil service and the Reichsbahn (German railways).

1. **The Holocaust was only perpetrated by Germans – incorrect because...**

Although Nazi Germany initiated and organised the Holocaust, the perpetrators included many non-Germans. They included governments which murdered Jews themselves (Romania, Croatia) or willingly handed them over to the Nazis (Vichy France, Slovakia), as well as individuals who served in German killing units or acted on their own initiative. There were people in every country who denounced Jews, just as there were people in every country who saved Jewish lives, illustrating the need to avoid the temptation to divide countries into ‘good’ and ‘bad’.

1. **If perpetrators had refused to participate, they would have been shot or sent to a concentration camp – incorrect because...**

Historians and German prosecutors have failed to find a single case of someone being shot or arrested for refusal to take part in the killing of Jews. By contrast, there are well-documented examples of commanders offering their men the choice not to take part. Those who did not wish to participate were typically reassigned to other duties. Refusal might well have had implications for career advancement, but that raises very different moral questions to the belief that people were compelled to become murderers on pain of death.

1. **Most Jews were murdered in concentration camps – incorrect because...**

Most Jews were murdered in purpose-built extermination camps (including Bełżec, Chełmno, Sobibór and Treblinka), which were radically different to concentration camps, or by shooting in sites close to their homes. The confusion has two main causes. Firstly, the best-known killing site, Auschwitz-Birkenau, was a concentration as well as extermination camp. Secondly, as German forces retreated in 1944-45, surviving Jewish prisoners were evacuated to concentration camps in Germany such as Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald where many died from disease and starvation. This led to the misconception, when these camps were liberated in 1945, that they had always been central to the Holocaust.

1. **Jews did not resist – incorrect because...**

There were many obstacles to Jewish resistance to the Nazis. Not only were Jews confronted by an opponent with overwhelming force; the starvation and exhaustion which characterised life in the ghettos of eastern Europe limited the ability to resist. It is also important to realise that Jews did not know in advance that the Nazis intended to murder them; many people therefore believed that resistance would make the situation worse by provoking Nazi reprisals. Nonetheless, as the Holocaust developed, armed Jewish resistance increasingly emerged in the form of ghetto revolts and partisan groups. There were even armed uprisings in three death camps (Auschwitz, Sobibór, Treblinka). In addition, many Jews practised what has been termed ‘spiritual resistance’ through activities such as preserving cultural life, organising education, and recording Nazi crimes.

1. **Most Germans knew nothing about the Holocaust – incorrect because...**

The Nazis certainly went to some lengths to conceal the evidence of their crimes; in 1943 Himmler famously described the murder of the Jews as “an unwritten and never to be written page of glory in our history”. In reality, however, the Holocaust was what has been termed ‘an open secret’: most citizens were aware of at least some aspects of it, especially the deportation of German Jews, which could hardly be ignored, and the mass shootings in the Soviet Union, which were often witnessed by ordinary soldiers who in turn commented on them in letters home or whilst on leave.

If students/staff have any further questions, please email [hilary.samuels@dulwich-singapore.edu.sg](mailto:hilary.samuels@dulwich-singapore.edu.sg) for more clarification.

**Sources:**

<https://www.hmd.org.uk/>

<https://www.het.org.uk/>

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/en>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/holydays/yomhashoa.shtml>