

Jews in Germany in 1938 – a lesson unit; grades 8-11

Unit Goal: What was the experience of Jews living in Germany in 1938? Was genocide predictable? Why didn't more Jews "just leave?"

The following is a unit that can be taught in as few as 4 classes or in greater depth over a longer period of time.

Which courses might use this?

- Jewish History: For decades in the 19th and early 20th century Jews felt Germany was home. Even as an anti-Semitic party brutally grabbed dictatorial power, many Jews imagined that Germany was their home. Understanding the relationship of Jews and the states in which they live is as timely today as it was 80 years ago.
- European/World History: The modern European experiment of diversity and emancipation was very much in doubt by 1938. Who was watching this play out and what did they think was happening? The story of this year is as much a story of Germany and Europe as it is a Jewish story.
- Holocaust Studies: 1938 was a critical year of the development of the Nazis, the German people, and their relationships to the Jews.
- Civics: Using the Nazi Germany (1938) case study: How does an entrenched fascist government treat ethnic minority groups? How do those ethnic minorities respond when the government increasingly persecutes them? Are there patterns that emerge in those responses? Is it possible to predict future behaviors of the persecuting or persecuted groups?

Lesson One: What do students assume about life of the Jews in 1938?	Page 2
Lesson Two: Contextualizing the broad story – Jews in Germany, 1919-1939	Page 3
Lesson Three: Was genocide foreseeable in 1938?	Page 4
Lesson Four: <i>Why didn't they just leave?</i>	Page 6
Lesson Five: How did German Jews perceive the situation in 1938?	Page 8
Lesson Six: <i>Why didn't they do more?</i> American Jewish responses	Page 10
Final unit activity	Page 11
Alternative unit activity	Page 12
A one-class lesson	Page 13

Lesson One: What do students assume about life of the Jews in 1938?

- a. Part One – Students will establish their **baseline assumptions**
 - i. Teacher provides paper with the following prompt on top: “Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power in Germany in 1933. World War Two began in 1939. Tell the story of the German Jews during these years.”
 - ii. Give students about 6-8 minutes to write.
 - iii. Teachers then provide an envelope. Have students fold their stories and seal them in an envelope. Put their names and dates on the envelope for unsealing later (at end of unit).

- b. Part Two – Students will begin to learn **historical context** to more thoughtfully evaluate their own assumptions about the narrative of German Jews in the 1930’s.
 - i. While students are writing their narratives, hang four pictures with accompanying text from the site on the walls (one in each corner). The images should each tell a rich story about how Jews were living in Germany in 1938, and should be substantively different than the other three. Below are four suggestions but the teacher should feel free to choose others
 1. July 17 — Ursula Meseritz at a cafe
 2. November 11 — Chemnitz synagogue in ruins
 3. April 15 — Passover by the Jewish Winter Relief Agency
 4. January 31 — A postcard from the trip to the Riviera
 - ii. Have the students silently walk the room and carefully examine the pictures and read the accompanying texts.
 - iii. Ask them for any clarifying questions.
 - iv. Ask them to go stand next to the picture that most resembles the story they composed. Have them share out with their internal group. Have them share out an insight or two from their internal discussion with the full class.

- v. Ask them to stand next to the picture that they feel does not fairly represent the story of German Jews during the 1930's. Repeat the process from question #1.
- c. **Exit Ticket:** Provide the students with the following set of prompts. Students need to answer three of the following: (Each of the prompts refers to the story of the Jews in Germany during the years 1933-1939.)
- i. One thing that surprised me today was:_____
 - ii. One thing that I continue to believe is:_____
 - iii. One thing that I am now seeing differently is:_____
 - iv. One thing that confuses me is:_____
 - v. One thing I would like to know more about is:_____
- d. **Homework for next class:** Read an excerpt/secondary overview of the 1919-1939 story. **LBI will produce/provide** three possible texts for three ascending levels of secondary reading skills and level of detail. Teacher should assign texts as appropriate.

Lesson Two: Contextualizing the broad story – Jews in Germany, 1919-1939

a. Major activity: “Pick Four”

1. Teacher asks if there are any clarification questions from the previous night’s reading.
2. Teacher hands out a timeline with 12-15 events (dates/events should be pulled from the previous night’s reading). Teacher provides the following prompt: “**Which four events on the timeline are the four most historically significant events in the lives of the Jewish people of Germany between 1919-1939.**” (Note to teacher: Don’t define what you mean by historically significant – allow the students to chew on that during their ensuing conversation. You might want to have a meta-conversation about what they understood the word to mean after.)
3. Students look over the events and put a check next to their four “most significant.”
4. Teacher projects/hangs a clean copy of the timeline on the board. Students first eliminate the ones no one chose.
5. Next, students discuss the ones still in play. They defend the dates/ events they think should not be eliminated and counter the dates/ events they think should be knocked out. When the conversation about any given date/event becomes circular or ceases delving in further depth, have the class vote on whether the event stays or goes.
6. Narrow it down to a class “agreed upon” four events.

b. Ticket to leave:

1. The date I most agreed with (chosen by the close) was _____ and why:
2. The date I most disagreed with was _____ and why:

c. **Homework:** Students will be given 6-8 documents. They will read the documents and, based on what the documents say, they will answer the question: **Was genocide foreseeable in 1938?**

- Feb 13 – Das Scharze Korps prediction
- Feb 24 – Degenerate Art exhibit
- March 5 – Tennis star arrested for homosexual relations with a Jew
- April 20 – WWI veterans exempted
- April 21 – Reich Propaganda Ministry and Jewish emigration
- June 9 – last public bathing spot in Berlin
- June 3 – Incarcerated Jews
- June 20 – Vandalism

Lesson Three: Was genocide foreseeable in 1938?

a. Activator:

1. On a notecard, have students compose a random number at the top of the notecard. Students will then (on the notecard) write their answer to the homework question (was genocide foreseeable in 1938) and describe which piece of evidence they found most compelling.
2. After writing (3-5 minutes), teacher should collect the cards and redistribute randomly. The recipient of the new card reads the answer/evidence and will compose a response to the thought provided by the first student (on the other side of the card).
3. When this second round is completed (3 minutes) teacher collects and redistributes the cards to the original authors.

b. Meta-analysis (of the activator activity):

1. Ask students to read both sides of the card and then ask: Was the written feedback you got helpful? If so – how? Specifically what makes for effective feedback? Ask students to share an example of effective feedback and have the class name the specific elements that made the feedback helpful. (This will be a good warm-up for the main activity, to come)
2. Teacher should then ask the original author to put his/her name atop the notecard and then collect the notecards for data (checking for understanding of the homework; ability to use evidence compellingly; etc)

c. Gallery walk/silent conversation

1. Silent conversation –
 - i. Teacher prep:
 - Teacher will tape each document to the center of its own piece of poster board or butcher paper (the surrounding blank paper should be considerable larger than the text in the center).
 - Tape the posterboard/butcher paper to the wall, spread around the room (make sure there's enough space for students to gather around each).

- Provide each student with a sharpie (a pen could work – but might be challenging when used to write on a wall; if students are using pens the posterboard could be laid on desks throughout the room)

ii. Round one: Gallery Walk

Have students walk around the room with their pens and compose their thoughts on each of the posterboards. Each comment should be directly related to the text on the posterboard.

iii. Round two: Silent Conversation part one –

Students should walk around and compose a comment/ response to one of the ideas on the posterboard (from round one). The response should be clearly and specifically linked to a first commenter (both by an arrow and by specific reference words “this commenter said “X” and I’m wondering if...”)

iv. Round three: Silent Conversation part two –

Have students do another gallery walk and read all the comments. Have them pick one thing they read and would like to say more about and then offer their comment on that

2. Meta-analysis –

- i. Ask students to note which pieces of feedback they found most helpful. This should be a continuation of the meta-analysis of the first activity. The goal is to help students understand the value of referring to and specifically citing concrete evidence. This will be the basis for the kinds of comments that will be used in the final activity. Record these and save them for that final activity.

Note: If there is more time to dedicate to another class a follow-up seminar on the topic of whether the genocide was foreseeable would be a good way to further process and deepen this complicated question. There are many seminar styles and teachers should feel free to use the ones most appropriate for their class. In terms of prepping for the content of the seminar, the teacher should:

- Provide the two short (one page each) secondary overviews of both sides of the claim about the foreseeability of genocide in 1938. Students should read them for homework and note which arguments they find most compelling on each side and least compelling on each side. (They could type these up and turn them in to the teacher as a good check for understanding.)
- In class, the seminar should focus on the evidence. What do the primary sources prove? What do they not prove? (this should go back to the analysis of the primary sources from the day before).

Lesson Four: *Why didn't they just leave?*

Note to teacher: *This lesson is the first of a pair designed to help students understand why the decision to leave Germany was so complicated. It can be taught over two classes (as is spelled out here) or in one (by combining the documents for the round-robin below).*

a. Activator:

1. Have students answer (in writing) the question: Why did Jews want to leave Germany in 1938? (3-5 minutes) *(Students should have enough context from the previous classes to begin thinking about this question.)*
2. Share answers.
3. As students are answering the question, teacher should note the assumptions that they are making. Teacher (or appointed scribe) should write them on the board. It will be critical to have them readily accessible to reference and unpack.

b. Major activity: Small group analysis.

1. **Set up:** Teacher should create 5 stations throughout the room. Place 2 sources (with secondary overviews) on each table. Divide class into five groups.

Sources:

1. January 9 – *New JCC in Hamburg*
2. Jan 14 – *Berlin theater* (or Jan 22 – *Victory of the Underdog*)
3. Jan 15 and Jan 31 - *In a suit on the beach at Palestine and at the French Riviera*
4. Jan 20 – *Harrods of Berlin*
5. March 13 – *One day after the Anschluss*
6. March 19 – *Aryanization of Jewish businesses*
7. April 23 – *Humiliation at the Prater Park*
8. June 10 – *Nazis tear down Munich Synagogue*

9. July 17 – *Ursula Meseritz at the café*
10. July 15 – Chemnitz synagogue picture

2. Round-robin:

- a. Each group is placed at an initial station where they should examine the documents and answer as a group: (*Looking at images and letters that suggest permanence and wanting to stay*)
 - i. What do you notice about the source document? Note the details.
 - ii. What does this source show? (What does it seem to prove?)
- b. Have the students move from station to station to examine each of the texts. Have them answer the above questions as they arrive at each station.

3. **Full class:** Provide the students with access to all of the documents (paper or electronically). Have them look them over again with the following question: **Is there a common theme?**

- ii. Discuss: Is there a common theme?
- iii. Does this present a compelling story?

c. **Summarizer** – Unpacking assumptions

1. Read the assumptions made at the beginning of the class. Pick one to discuss. What did you discuss today that challenges that assumption? What about the assumption still might be true?
2. **Exit Ticket:** Pick another (not discussed by the class) of the assumptions on the board. After today's class – do you find the assumption compelling? Why or why not?

If there is extra time, this lesson could (and is recommended to) take more time. Either do one of the below or combine them:

- a. Split up the primary sources over two days (one way to do that would be to do focus on those that lean toward staying (1,2,3,4,9,10) and then those that point to leaving (5,6,7,8);
- b. Spend more time on the assumptions question;

3. Work on the skill of categorizing. Ask them to develop possible reasons someone might want to leave. (economic, community, religion, safety, etc.).
 - i. To what degree was it about racial or religious persecution (vs economic persecution)? What do the results seem to imply or suggest?
4. What role did Zionism play in immigration? Measuring the push and the pull factors?

Lesson Five: How did German Jews perceive the situation in 1938?

(Note: Lessons 1-4 are the necessary context for lessons five and six)

a. Activator:

- a. Ask students to think back to all of the stories about life in Germany during 1938 that they have thus far learned.
- b. They should then pick a particular life-cycle event taking place in 1938 and compose either a letter to a participant involved in the event (like a birthday card) or a diary entry in which you offer thoughts on the event that just took place.
- c. Possible events: A birthday; a marriage; a bar/bat mitzvah; the birth of a child; celebration of Passover

b. Main activity:

- a. Have them read the personal accounts of the major events
 - June 30 – Helen Hesse’s 5th Birthday (by father Wilhelm)
 - May 21 – Heinz Neumann celebrates his Bar Mitzvah
 - April 13 – A birthday album for 70 year old Heinrich Stahl from the Ahawah Children’s Home
 - March 24 – Hedwig Wallach dies; Max Kirschner delivers the eulogy
 - January 17 – Letter of congratulations on a marriage (inter); Kathe Schmid and Herman Hoerlin
 - January 6 – Fritz Schurmann’s 18th birthday; wishes from friend Gerard

Place the accounts on the wall around the room. Have the students stand next to various stations. See below for prompts. At each stop, allow them some time to process with the group. Tell them that you will be calling on a random person to share one reason why it was surprising (so everyone should be prepared). If there’s time, allow for other groups to ask questions.

- i. The one that most surprised them.
- ii. The one that they relate to the most.
- iii. The one written by or about a person you would like to meet.

c. Set up for homework and next class.

- a. Tell students that we will be looking at the complicated relationship of these German people with their American Jewish co-religionists. The title of the class will be “Why didn’t they do more?” This is a common question and it is thus critical to answer it thoughtfully.
- b. We will first need to know what it is that American Jews had the opportunity to know. Here is one example of something that Americans understood: We will start with a story involving Methodists.
- c. Activator activity for the upcoming homework assignment:
 - i. Have students read the January 4 story about the Methodists in the US
 - ii. Ask them – what is the story about? What message were the Methodists trying to send? Why did the JTA think this may have been a story worth covering?
- d. Homework for next class (lesson six): Students read the 6 Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) stories. Explain to students that the JTA was an American based news agency that primarily targeted Jewish audiences in the English-speaking world. It extensively covered global events in which Jews were participants and their coverage of the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany was extensive. The following are six reports that covered stories from Germany and Austria in 1938. As students read the stories they should consider: What did American audiences have the opportunity to know about the situation in Nazi Germany/Austria?

JTA stories to read:

- Jan 30 – JTA – Jewish newspapers suspended
- March 13 – One day after Anschluss
- March 25 – Jews in Vienna consulate
- April 14 -New Persecution
- May 20 – Jewish boycott in Austria
- June 7 – Suicides in Vienna

Lesson Six: Why didn't they do more? Unpacking American Jewish response to persecution and suffering in Germany

Teacher begins by asking students to discuss in pairs the following questions, based on their analysis of the posts below:

What was the perspective of the situation of German Jews in 1938? What was public and available for American Jews to see?

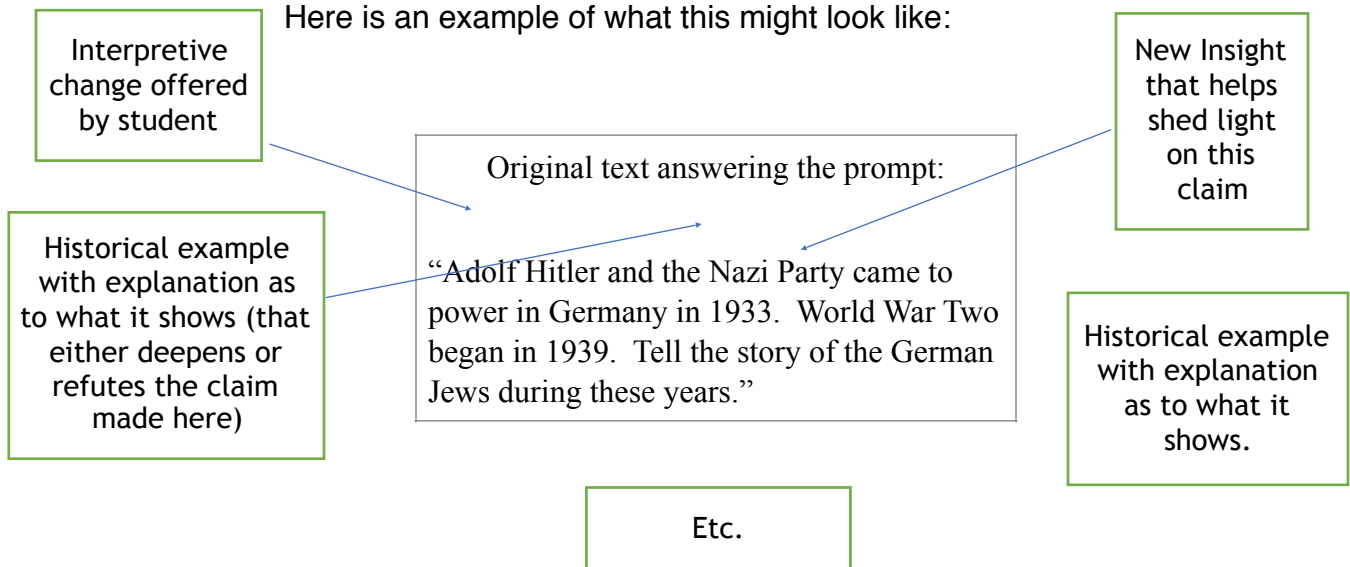
- Jan 30 – JTA – Jewish newspapers suspended
- March 13 – one day after Anschluss
- March 25 – Jews in Vienna consulate
- April 14 -New Persecution
- May 20 – Jewish boycott in Austria
- June 7 – Suicides in Vienna

Main activity:

1. Compare and contrast the four letters
 - March 8 – Affidavit from uncle Charles
 - April 5 – One man can only do so much
 - July 12 – I don't even know if we're related
 - July 16 – Only if you work
2. What was the American view? How do we explain the similarities in these letters? The differences?
3. The ethics of it all:
 - i. Craft an argument that supports the position of each letter writer.
 - ii. What were the value tensions at stake in determining what to do in the face of a situation like the one in Germany, 1938?

Final unit activity: A Gloss on the Initial Assumption

- 1) Teachers return to each student their initial narratives about the story of the Jews in Germany. Students unseal the envelopes. Read them quietly. Break them into small groups to reflect: What do I now believe or know that I didn't before? What has been confirmed for me that I already knew or believed?
- 2) Final written component: Students will create a gloss on the initial narrative. They will do this either for their own or one of their classmates. Alternatively, the teacher can compose one that all students will respond to (so each student would be responding to the same baseline text).
 - a. The text in the center would be the answer to the initial prompt at the beginning of the unit.
 - b. Comments surrounding it might focus on interpretive nuance, examples that either bolster or counter previous assumptions, new insights that need to be added, etc. See the "silent conversation" activity for other ideas.
Here is an example of what this might look like:



Alternative Final Activities:

- 1) Was Kristallnacht a new development or a continuation of what had been happening previously?
 - a. An essay contest
- 2) Historiography and time-lining
 - a. Students each build a timeline of the ten most important dates of the year that tell a compelling story of the year 1938.
 - b. When complete, each student shares their timeline with another student. Students then compare and contrast the two timelines. (Teacher might want to intentionally pair the timelines to ensure the contrasts are sharp enough). Students evaluate: What is the narrative/story being told by each timeline? How are the two similar? How are they different?
 - c. This exercise lends itself to teaching students about historiography. How do historians tell stories? And why do they often times tell them so differently? This question/examination could work as a final seminar discussion.
- 3) Change/Continuity between January 1 and December 31, 1938. Students work in groups of three and prepare their own “change/continuity” maps or timelines, with a short essay that contextualizes them. Some directing questions may include:
 - a. In what way did things change? In what way did things stay the same?
 - b. What were the turning points? Why would you call them such?
 - c. Historiographical Question: Is there a clear change by the end of 1938? This would be the basis for asking this question.
- 4) Which document from the *1938Projekt* collection best defines the story of 1938?
 - a. Each student picks one and writes an essay explaining their choice.
- 5) Curate an “1938 — a Turning Point in History” exhibition designed for a publically-accessible site at your school.