

LESSON

The Holocaust and North Africa: Resistance in the Camps

Overview

About This Lesson

In previous lessons, students explored the diversity of Jewish life in North Africa, and they learned about the ways in which antisemitic legislation, occupation, and the onset of war impacted Jewish communities across the region. This lesson further expands the study of the Holocaust and wartime North Africa.

The readings in this lesson lift up the voices of North Africans who experienced the camps, with a particular focus on ways in which they resisted oppression. From Libyan and Tunisian Jews celebrating holidays in labor camps in the Sahara, to Algerian Muslims steadfastly committed to prayer in spite of the violent threats of a camp overseer, and finally to the child of Moroccan immigrants to France who was sent to Auschwitz with her mother, these stories convey aspects of the human spirit and decision-making in times of crisis.

As students process this challenging material, they will explore connections to the concept of human dignity and what it means to preserve or affirm dignity in the face of dehumanization.

Essential Question

- In what ways do the experiences of Jews in pre-war and wartime North Africa provide a more complete story of World War II and the Holocaust?

Guiding Questions

- Why is it important to engage with the history of the Holocaust and wartime North Africa?
- How did the Nazis and their collaborators seek to deprive their victims of basic human dignity?
- How did those targeted attempt to preserve or reclaim their dignity, and what can this teach us about power and agency?

Learning Objectives

- Students will analyze, discuss, and explain the range of choices available to individuals, groups, and nations during the Holocaust.
- Students will explore the possible motivations and reasons for decision-making in this time of crisis.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following texts and materials. Access materials in [this Google Folder](#).

- **Handout:** Viewing Guide for “The Intersecting Histories of the Holocaust and Wartime North Africa”
- **Reading:** “Marking the Days of Awe in Sidi Aziz (1942)”
- **Reading:** “Celebrating Purim in the Bizerte Camp (1942–1943)”
- **Handout:** Found Poem Graphic Organizer
- **Reading:** “An Algerian Muslim’s Memories of Internment (1940–1943)”
- **Reading:** “A ‘Total Violation of Human Dignity’ Girlhood Interrupted in Auschwitz (1944)”
- **Video:** The Intersecting Histories of the Holocaust and Wartime North Africa

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. Scaffolding for this Lesson

If your school or community does not have a large Jewish population, or your students have not had exposure to Jewish faith and culture through their friends, families, or curriculum, it is important to include exploration of Jewish identity leading into this lesson. You can incorporate activities from **Pre-War Jewish Life in North Africa** and/or explore the lesson on the [Complexity of Jewish Identity](#) and the reading [Being Jewish in the United States](#). These extensions are designed to help students start to recognize that identifying as Jewish implies membership in a rich and diverse set of beliefs and cultural practices.

2. Engaging with Challenging Content

In this lesson, students will read a range of sources that illuminate the realities of the camps in North Africa. During WWII and the Holocaust, North Africans from a wide range of backgrounds were sent to penal, labor, and internment camps across North Africa. In addition, some North African Jews were sent to concentration and death camps in Europe. For these reasons, it is crucial that students have the opportunity to process individually and together the emotions and questions this history evokes. It is especially important for you to look at students’ work and their participation in class discussions for evidence of how they are processing what they encounter. If necessary, follow up with individual students to offer support, or set aside additional class time for students to talk through and articulate their thoughts and feelings about this challenging history. We also recommend that you do the following:

- Many teachers want their students to achieve emotional engagement with the history of the Holocaust and therefore teach this history with the goal of fostering empathy. However, this unit, like any examination of the Holocaust, includes historical descriptions and firsthand accounts that some students may find

emotionally challenging. Teachers should select components from this resource that are most appropriate for the intellectual and emotional needs of their students.

- It is difficult to predict how students will respond to primary and secondary source readings, documents, and films. One student may respond with emotion to a particular reading, while others may not find it powerful in the same way. In addition, different people demonstrate emotion in different ways. Some students will be silent. Some may laugh. Some may not want to talk. Some may take days to process difficult stories. For some, a particular firsthand account may be incomprehensible; for others, it may be familiar.
- It is also important to note that our experience suggests that it is often problematic to use graphic images and films or to attempt to use simulations to help students understand aspects of this history. Such resources and activities can traumatize some students, desensitize others, or trivialize the history.
- Briefly review the class contract with students before beginning the lesson. This will help to reinforce the norms you have established and the idea of the classroom as a safe space for students to voice concerns, questions, or emotions that may arise.

3. Preparing for the Found Poem Activity

The “Found Poem” activity may take more than one class period to complete. If this is the case, students can complete the **Found Poem Graphic Organizer** in the activity on day 1, then compose and share their poems on day 2. If students are unfamiliar with this type of writing, teachers should provide an example of a found poem drawn from one of the readings.

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Scholar Video Viewing Guide & Survivor Testimony

Start by modeling the assignment with a Think Aloud in which you share your own example of someone who inspires you to use your agency, power, and voice to take action and then explain why they inspire you. Make sure you provide specific examples to model the kind of response that students should try to develop. Then, as a class, make a list on the board of individuals and groups students might choose from—a relative, friend, mentor, coach, or someone more well known. Have them choose one from the list or their own idea to write about in a journal response and then share ideas with a partner. Next, pass out the Agency and Action in the World Today handout and choose one of the following two options, depending on how much time you plan to spend on this assessment:

2. Create Found Poems with Written Descriptions of Camp Life

Explain to students that they will now create a Found Poem. A [found poem](#) is a poem that is created using only words, phrases, or quotations that have been selected and rearranged from another text. To create found poems, students must choose language that

is particularly meaningful or interesting to them, then organize the language around a theme or message. Writing found poems is a structured way to have students review material and synthesize their learning. If students are unfamiliar with the format of a Found Poem, show them your example of a Found Poem using one of the assigned readings.

Divide the students into two groups.

- Group 1 will read: **“Marking the Days of Awe in Sidi Aziz (1942)”**
- Group 2 will read: **“Celebrating Purim in the Bizerte Camp (1942–1943)”**

Instruct students to work with a partner or as a group that has the same reading to complete the **Found Poem Graphic Organizer** for their assigned reading.

After completing the table, students should begin to write their Found Poems. Post the following directions on a slide or on a big piece of paper to guide students in the writing process:

- **Share reflections captured in the table with each other.**
- **Identify a theme and a message.** A theme is a broad concept such as “obedience” or “loyalty.” A message is a specific idea they would like to express about this theme. For example, “decision-making” is a theme. A message about decision-making expressed by humanitarian Carl Wilkens is, “Every situation is an opportunity and every opportunity demands a decision.” In this context, students can choose from the following themes:
 - Telling a complex story
 - Choices to stand up in the face of injustice and oppression
 - Dignity in the wake of injustice and oppression
- **Select additional language.** Found poems only use words that have been collected from other sources. So, once students have selected a theme and a message, they may need to review their materials again to collect additional language.
- **Compose a poem.** Students are now ready to arrange the language they selected to create their found poems. One approach to this task is to have students write all of the words and phrases on slips of paper, so that they can move the slips around until they are satisfied with their poem. Let students know that they cannot add their own words when creating a found poem (not even articles or prepositions), but they can repeat words or phrases as often as they like. Also, when composing found poems, students do not need to use all of the words or phrases they previously selected.

Once the students have created their found poems, break the students up into groups so that a group with a poem from each reading is paired. Ask them to share and discuss their poems using the following questions:

- What do the poems have in common?
- How are they different?

- What are the messages, and why are they important?

Then, whole class can come back together to discuss the messages and reflect on the following question:

Both readings feature imprisoned Jews celebrating holidays in the midst of inhumane living and laboring conditions. What might they have gained from such celebrations?

Consider posting the completed Found Poems around the room for students to read.

Extension Activities

1. Word Wall: Defining Dignity

Students will read two sources and engage in a [Word Wall](#) activity that creates a place in the classroom where students display the meanings of important ideas using words and pictures. As students encounter new vocabulary in a text or video, creating a word wall offers one way to help them comprehend and interpret ideas in the text. Select a place in the room for your word wall. Large sheets of poster paper or a dedicated whiteboard work well.

Before students begin reading the following text, assign them to work in pairs and define the term “dignity” for the class word wall. You can also require students to present an image or graphic that represents the meaning of this word.

New terms can be added to the word wall as needed. Students can also update the definitions on their own word walls as they develop a deeper understanding of key terms.

There are two primary source texts that convey different aspects of the struggle for dignity.

- **“An Algerian Muslim’s Memories of Internment (1940–1943)”** is from the perspective of an Algerian Muslim man, describing his experience of internment in North Africa.
- **“A ‘Total Violation of Human Dignity’ Girlhood Interrupted in Auschwitz (1944)”** is from the perspective of a Jewish girl who was born in France to parents who had immigrated from Morocco, and the particular focus is on her experience in Auschwitz.

Instruct students to silently read **“An Algerian Muslim’s Memories of Internment (1940–1943)”**, underlining words or phrases that stand out to them and writing question marks next to any words or ideas they don’t understand.

After students have completed the reading:

- Review students’ questions, and ask them to share words or phrases that stood out to them. Then ask: what feelings came up while reading this text?

- Return to the word wall and ask how the text connects to their understanding of human dignity and what it means to strive to preserve or reclaim that dignity. Add any new ideas to the wall.

Before going on to read the second text, share the fact that it takes place in Europe and focuses on experiences at Auschwitz. It is important to recognize that there were North African Jews in the camps in Europe. Some of them were sent to camps from North Africa and some were living in Europe during the Holocaust and were sent to camps when they were caught by the Nazis. The latter is the case in this reading.

After providing historical context, read the following text aloud: **“A ‘Total Violation of Human Dignity’ Girlhood Interrupted in Auschwitz (1944)”**. Instruct students to listen and write down ideas or phrases that stand out to them.

Then, ask students: What feelings come up as you listen to this testimony?

Return to the word wall and revisit the words and images related to human dignity. Then ask students to complete the following [Connect, Extend, Challenge](#) activity as an exit card: How do the testimonies we read today connect, extend, or challenge our definition of human dignity on the word wall?