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# The void

What are enduring consequences of the Holocaust?

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## Key Question: What are enduring consequences of the Holocaust?

### Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- Consider the impact of the Holocaust on the physical and political landscape of Europe
- Reflect on specific places where there were once Jewish communities and explore the effects of loss
- Recognise renewed interest in former Jewish communities and explore the changes this has brought since the end of the Second World War

### Rationale

As tempting as it may be, it is essential to contest the idea that our teaching about the Holocaust can come to some sort of natural end with the conclusion of the Second World War. The notion that with liberation of the camps and defeat of Nazi Germany the story of the Holocaust reached 'completion' belies how the effects of the genocide are still being felt today. Ours is, after all, a post-Holocaust world, and though it may at times be an uncomfortable truth we must ensure our students are aware of the long-term impact the extermination of European Jewry has had on our contemporary physical, cultural and political landscapes.

This lesson seeks to take in these enduring consequences of the Holocaust. It is particularly concerned with the voids which have been created by that genocide. To teach about something that is no longer present is, by its nature, difficult; in order to make the notion of absence more tangible the lesson explores how this is embodied in three specific places.

### Key Information

- The lesson is intended for Year 9 students and above. It is designed for use in History and RE classrooms but with adaptation could be used in various subjects. It is well suited for developing students' abstract thinking and philosophical understanding.
- Timings are suggested on the basis of a one hour lesson, and may need modifying accordingly.
- The lesson presupposes prior study into the history of the Holocaust. In addressing the themes that it does, this lesson is well-suited to being used in conjunction with other materials on the Legacy of the Holocaust created by the Centre for Holocaust Education.
- Pedagogical guidance is provided in the Additional Information section following this lesson plan. This is to be used in conjunction with the accompanying PowerPoint.

## Lesson Plan

### What is a void? (10 minutes)

Begin by displaying Slide 2 of the PowerPoint, taking suggestions from students as to what the map represents. Explain the map visually reflects the pre-war size of Jewish populations in those European countries which would later come under Nazi influence and/or control. You may take this opportunity to highlight both the continental spread of these communities as well as the distribution of Jews in these countries.

Move to Slide 3 of the PowerPoint asking again for suggestions as to what the map reveals. Expect students to refer to the number of people killed. Draw attention to the empty part of each box: this indicates what was lost and the 'void' created by the Holocaust. Ask students if it is possible to 'see' or represent something that does not exist. End by encouraging them to think of ways they might 'see' this non-existent thing, and ask if something is not there does this necessarily mean it doesn't matter.

### Reflecting on a space (15 minutes)

In pairs or small groups provide students with Photo card 1 (Rhodes) and Photo card 2 (Krakow). At the same time display Slides 4 and 5 of the PowerPoint. You might also have these images enlarged onto sheets of paper which you pin to a wall or display board. As students look at these images ask them to discuss and decide for each:

- When was the photograph taken?
- Where was it taken?

Have students write their ideas onto Post-It Notes. These should then be affixed to the photographs as they appear on the whiteboard or wall/display board. Allow students the opportunity to look at others' ideas.

Open up a class discussion. Move towards the question of what, if anything, is missing in these photographs; what is the 'void', or, how is the 'empty part' of the boxes seen on the map earlier made visible in these images? Some students may feel frustrated at being unable to identify the void: remind students that when we speak of a void or a non-existence it is – naturally – not always obvious. Explain to students this makes it all the more important that we think carefully about what we are seeing and how we are looking: it is often what we cannot see which reveals the most.

'Reveal' to students the answers to the questions by distributing the Rhodes and Krakow information cards and talking students through where the photographs come from. Encourage them to think about what these images suggest was lost: not just people from the time who were killed in the Holocaust, but the children and the grandchildren – the subsequent generations – who were not born because of the Holocaust. First in pairs or groups and then

as a class discuss:

- How might these places look today if the Holocaust had not occurred?
- What do these images say about the nature of genocide?

The key point to be made is that the legacy of genocide does not end with murder; rather it impacts and imprints itself on subsequent generations and manifests itself in the world we inhabit. Explain to students they will explore some of these ideas in the next activity.

## Understanding the post-war period (20 minutes)

In small groups, ask students to place the black and white photographs of Rymanow synagogue in chronological order. These sorting cards are not dated, so students will need to discuss and establish why they are choosing a particular order. The purpose of the activity is therefore to prompt them to raise questions about the post-war history of the synagogue.

Have each group present their ordering to the class. They might do this by using enlarged copies of the photographs and position them on the wall. In each case they should explain their rationale. Once all have fed back, distribute the information card on Rymanow which contains the correct order of the images. They may be surprised to see the most recent photograph is that of the restored building.

With Slides 6 and 7 in the background, discuss:

- What has changed since the war
- Why the synagogue has been rebuilt and by whom
- What is still missing from Rymanow

As you lead this discussion, be sure students understand there are no Jews living in Rymanow, and the synagogue is only used by visiting Jewish groups. The building's continued maintenance has been dependent upon non-Jews; itself worthy of discussion. What is missing in Rymanow then is a Jewish community.

## Plenary: Visualising the void (15 minutes)

Ask students to summarise the learning that has occurred. Remind them they have been introduced to the reality of large parts of Europe being devoid of Jews. Highlight how in a number of cases buildings which might normally be dismissed as mere ruins are now actually the only evidence left of formerly vibrant communities. Display Slide 8 and/or distribute the Samuel Bak painting. Individually, in pairs, or in small groups, ask students to consider:

- The title of the painting
- The significance of the tree and its leaves
- The background
- Whether they think the painting has a positive or negative message

Having considered these questions, ask students to relate this to the Rymanow synagogue colour image. Do the photo and painting tell the same story? Does the photo and the painting tell a different story to the photographs of Rhodes and Krakow they looked at earlier in the lesson?

## Engaging all learners

This lesson requires students to handle some abstract ideas and to enter into conceptually challenging lines of enquiry. This is no bad thing, though some students may require more support with this than others. More time could be spent on various elements of the lesson, such as the opening discussion of the maps. It may also be useful to reorder some of the activities: the Samuel Bak painting for example could be introduced earlier in the lesson, and might even be used as a core theme investigating what a survivor might be saying about the legacy of the Holocaust. In classrooms where literacy is a particular issue, focusing on the visual and development of speaking and listening skills could prove very fruitful.

Some students may find it useful to have a questioning frame which they can use to interrogate the various images they see in this lesson. This could be graduated, so that it begins with straightforward observational questions and moves to higher-order ones. For extension work, examining Holocaust-related monuments and memorials is particularly effective to thinking more deeply about the impact of the Holocaust on the post-war world. Similarly students could explore the [Virtual Shtetl website](#) to discover more about the post-war history of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish life.

## Further information

Teachers interested in broaching the issue of the legacy of the Holocaust in the post-war world are encouraged to use the four lessons contained in the Centre's **Legacy of the Holocaust** series. They may also like to supplement students learning by using the open access lesson **Artefacts and Legacy**. A list of recommended websites related to the themes of the lesson can be found in the following Additional Information which follows.

## Additional Information

### Pedagogical guidance

Teaching about the Holocaust should not end in 1945, but must take account of the ways it has impacted our post-war world. The phrase 'contemporary relevance' is one frequently used in conjunction with the Holocaust, even though it is sometimes unclear what exactly is meant by it. In this lesson, it is the presence of absence in our contemporary culture and society which is considered to be 'relevant', important, challenging.

The scars made by the Holocaust on our European societies take various forms. The remnants of former camps are perhaps the most obvious and experiential 'sites of memory', but the genocide's legacies can also be seen in places where up until the Holocaust there had been vibrant Jewish communities. Over the past ten years many schools have begun to visit numerous Holocaust-related sites; however, many of these visits centre on visiting former Nazi camps, specifically Auschwitz-Birkenau, with only a very passing glance (if any) given to the towns and villages that once had large Jewish communities.

The lesson aims to redress this balance, and focus back on the individual Jewish people and their communities, rather than the methods of murder and the residue of sites left behind by the Nazis. Today, as we visit villages, towns and cities across Europe, how many of us really consider how different these places would have been if the Holocaust had not happened? Would the generations of Jews born after the war still live in these localities? Would the synagogues and schools still flourish? We cannot answer these questions because those generations who should have been born since 1945 never came into being. There are now huge areas of Europe where there are no living descendants of Jewish communities which had inhabited these spaces for hundreds, sometimes thousands of years.

This then is the void: not the void not simply left by those who died, but the void of those who were never born. It is this state of non-existence which has been described as 'the creative act of genocide'. And the impact of the Holocaust on the human geography of Europe is stark indeed: over 2000 years of Jewish tradition irrevocably changed, or gone altogether.

For those who survived and who knew those pre-war communities there was rarely the impetus or desire to rebuild a life in these places where there may have only been a handful left from hundreds or even thousands. Instead, they scattered across the world after 1945. In many instances the remnants of former communities were reduced to concrete shells – buildings left to crumble or be converted to other uses, with cemeteries either overgrown or reliant on the goodwill of non-Jews to maintain them. Since the fall of communism and growth

of European interest in Holocaust memory there has been renewed interest in Jewish heritage and the disappeared communities. In some places former Jewish buildings have been restored and a tourist industry has developed – sometimes leading to buildings being brought back from the brink of demolition, as in Rymanow; sometimes leading to kitsch, like the themed ‘Jewish’ restaurants of Krakow. Yet this should also not overlook a recent resurgence of Jewish life and interest in being Jewish – especially in Poland.

In sum, the lesson seeks to encourage students to be more aware of the world around them and how it has been – and continues to be – impacted by the Holocaust. Inevitably this opens on to a host of matters relating to history, philosophy, morality and ethics. In the process, it raises challenging and complex ideas and issues. Teachers working with this material will therefore need to be especially adaptable to the needs of their students. Reflexive questioning is essential, as is creating an environment where students can voice and share their ideas.

## Samuel Bak

Samuel Bak is a Holocaust survivor originally from Lithuania and currently living in Boston, USA. Many of Bak’s paintings reflect themes of the Holocaust and its legacy and take on a surrealist style. The image students are to look at is named ‘Tree of Life’ – the title alone reflects the Jewish tradition of seeing the Torah as ‘the tree of life’ as well as having an significance to the Jewish mystics or kabbalists.

On closer inspection the title of this painting might be seen as ironic – each branch is cut, and not connected to the trunk, the leaves are pierced stars of David that look like parchment, and at the heart of the image is a cross. The landscape is foreboding; the imagery dark. The only elements of hope are tiny in comparison to the dark aspects of the imagery. In the distance, there is a clear space in the sky where sunlight appears, and there is a tiny branch at the bottom of the tree still connected to the main trunk, even so this tiny branch looks as though it will soon shed its leaves, and its survival looks questionable. Perhaps in this painting Bak is reflecting his thoughts on the survival of Jewry in the heart of a Christian society where the Holocaust happened.

## Useful websites

The following websites provide further information on places and issues raised in the lesson.

<http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/>

The **virtual shtetl** focuses on the former Jewish communities of Poland. This website provides historical photographs as well as contemporary photos of the remnants of Jewish areas.

<http://www.galiciajewishmuseum.org/>

Although the **Galicia Museum** located in Krakow does not have many images on its website, it is possible to buy the Museum catalogue which includes a range of images taken across Galicia showing former Jewish buildings in the early 2000s.

<http://www.jewish-heritage-europe.eu/>

This website details the former Jewish communities in a number of countries across Europe.

[http://www.fodz.pl/download/szlak\\_chasydzki\\_rymanow\\_EN.pdf](http://www.fodz.pl/download/szlak_chasydzki_rymanow_EN.pdf)

**The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland.** This PDF includes background specific details of the Jewish community at **Rymanow** and the rebuilding of the synagogue.

[http://www.puckergallery.com/artists/bak\\_index/bak\\_allseries.html](http://www.puckergallery.com/artists/bak_index/bak_allseries.html)

**The Pucker Gallery** represents the artist **Samuel Bak**. This website provides images of Bak's work as well as exhibition guides explaining many of the paintings.



## Acknowledgements

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