

History 45 –Environmental History of the Holocaust

Dr. Marianne Robins
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Course M 2:00- 3:00, Deane Hall 203
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Office Hours Wednesday 1:30-3:00 & Thursday 11:00-12:00, Deane Hall 203

Course Description

Catalog: A study of the Holocaust (1933-1945) that pays particular attention to the environmental factors as they impacted the manner in which the Holocaust was perpetrated, the experience of the victims, and the relationships between the victims and their neighbors as well as perpetrators. The class also examines the ways in which Nazis conceived of the Holocaust as an ecological project, and how it did fit into their understanding of nature. Finally, it considers the relationship between commemoration practices and the environment.

Outcomes

In this class, you will learn how to be better **historians**:

- You are invited to be **historians of the Holocaust**.
 - To familiarize yourself with the time-period and the **main components** of this historical process, we will spend the first few weeks of the semester discussing a short introductory survey of the Holocaust (David Engel, *The Holocaust, the Third Reich, and the Jews*). This text also provides a helpful introduction to some **major debates** among historians on the subject. The rest of the class will broaden the definition and scope of our study. We will consider a wide range of victims and a broad set of locations for the Holocaust.
 - The study of the Holocaust raises deep questions about human agency, moral decisions, the role of science in society, and the place of suffering in human life. It makes the past deeply relevant for the present, and challenges us as Christians to make sense of what seems to be beyond our comprehension. It is demanding as it requires more love and patience than we sometimes feel like we can give. Please feel free to come to me and discuss in class the difficult emotional and theological questions that arise as we study the Holocaust.
- You are invited to be **environmental historians** of the Holocaust.
 - At first glance, the Holocaust is a human catastrophe that seems little related to concerns about nature. In recent years however, historians have found that including nature in the study of the Holocaust -and collaborating with scholars in the natural and

social sciences- have deepened their understanding of the Holocaust. In this class we will consider the many ways in which nature functioned **materially** and **imaginatively** during the Holocaust.

- “Environmental history’s concern for the materiality of the natural environment offers us a tool for a better histories of the Holocaust. By paying attention to the physical, biological, ecological nature of dirt, water, air, trees, and animals (but also humans) we uncover new questions and new answers about the past” (Cole and Stroud). We will consider how the environment has affected the **ways the Holocaust was perpetrated, the victims’ experiences** of the Holocaust. We will pay attention to landscapes, be they ghettos, forest, camps, or rivers. We will pay attention to the ways in which geography and the environment constituted both constraints and opportunities to victims -a single landscape could provide both a site of genocide and a shelter for victims.
- Nature also played a critical ideological and imaginative role in the Holocaust, as it is deeply grounded in Nazi **understandings of nature** shared by many Western scientists in the early 1900’s. These particular views of nature have had strong implications for race, land, and eugenic policies. In considering German and North American discourses on race and the environment, we will need to account for the paradox between their apparent concerns for nature and their actual treatment of both human beings and the natural world. How is it that some prominent environmentalists in the United States also stood for the most radical racist and eugenic policies and ideologies? How did their particular understanding of nature -as a set of resources such as land, or as a world ruled by competition- generate war, exclusion and violence? How did this ideology translate on the ground as competition for territory and resources increased during the war?
- You are invited to be **critical readers of historical texts**. by the end of the semester, you should be able to read primary and secondary historical sources critically:
 - For primary sources, place them in their context and explain how this context shapes your interpretation of the text;
 - For secondary sources, identify main arguments, place them in debates among historians, and critically analyze them by pointing out their strengths and limitations.
 - Students will be able to analyze historical sources with appropriate attention to their various contexts.

This course also fulfills Westmont's General Education requirement in Justice, Reconciliation, and Diversity on Biblical and Theological Grounds. The readings and exams in this course will help you examine social norms and systemic practices involving both disability, race and racism in Germany and the **United States** and challenge you to discern the responsibility in the work of justice and reconciliation in your own context. Through conversations, you will also have the opportunity to model Christlike dialogue while confronting challenging and sensitive issues. In particular,

- Throughout the semester, we will examine the roots, manifestations, and consequences of **antisemitism** in Nazi Germany (medieval antisemitism, racial antisemitism, eugenics and the particulars of Nazi antisemitism). Our readings will help us **reflect on the different forms of racism, from prejudices** (as described in Bergen for instance) to **ideological stance** (as described in Engel for instance).
- We will focus on particular on the movement of **eugenics** and on the way it is connected to the genocide of people with disabilities in Germany (known as T4) and their sterilization in the **United States**. We will compare and contrast the laws concerning people with the disabilities in the United States and in Nazi Germany.
- We will study the **laws and practices of exclusion of people of color** in the **United States** and in Germany (laws against **afro-Germans** and laws against Jews). We will examine more closely the ways in which these laws affected the lived experience of Jews.
- We will examine the role of **imperialism** in the Holocaust. First, we will consider the ways in which the racism evident in the German colonization of Namibia (and the genocide of the Nama and the Herrero) can be connected to the Holocaust (Zimmerer). Second, we will examine the ways in which the **American myth of the frontier** was influential in the ways in which Nazis framed their conquest in Eastern Europe and the extermination of the Jews.

We will emphasize in particular the ways in which racism and environmental thinking are connected and reflect on the possible responses Christian can have to environmental racism by seeking to promote environmental justice. We will also find inspiration in some of the victims and rescuers' particular responses to racism inherent to Nazi ideology -for instance by reflecting on **Etty Hillesum**, and the case of Protestant responses in **Le Chambon-sur-Lignon**. At the end of each section of the class, each exam (1: disability and Christian Justice, 2: Environmental Christian Justice and race, 3: Memory and Christian Justice) will include a take-home portion with a question that will ask you to reflect on the Christian responses to racism and/or prejudice against people with disabilities in your particular context. Each take-home question will include a short reading with biblical texts to guide your reflection.

Readings

- **Engel, David**. *The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews*. New York: Longman, 2000.
- Lower, Wendy. *The Ravine: A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed*. Mariner Books, 2021.
- **Cole, Time**. *Holocaust Landscapes*. Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016 (Ebook)
- **Reader**: Primary and secondary sources

Course Outcome	Departmental Outcome	General Education Outcome	Assignments and Assessment
Historical Skills: Primary and	Students will be able to read primary sources	Students will be able to analyze historical sources with	<i>Readings (journals), Discussions, Exams, Films and primary source analyses</i>

Secondary Sources	historically and use them effectively	appropriate attention to their various contexts	
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Assignments

1. Journals (30%)

We will spend a lot of time in the first half of the semester discussing how to analyze historical sources. We'll talk about the kinds of questions they allow us to ask and answer. For each class session, there will be something to read and prepare, and you must **keep a journal with your notes on each source**. Your notes do not need to be highly-polished, but they do need to be **thorough** (addressing the sorts of questions that we will be asking of sources in class) and **thoughtful**. Most of your entries should be several pages long. If your handwriting is difficult to decipher, please type your notes and submit them on Canvas by the beginning of class -bring your journal with you to class. Journals are meant to help you remember and interact with the readings -they should be helpful to you. What does the journal consist of? It depends on the kind of reading you are doing -see the **handout with guidelines** for textbooks, secondary sources, and primary sources. **Late work won't be accepted.**

2. Class Attendance and Participation (20%)

First, you need to come to class. I do expect you to be there. If you have to miss class for any reason, it is both important and polite to let me know ahead of time. If you miss 6 classes or more, you will be dropped from the roster.

Second, I want to hear from you this semester, and your classmates need to hear from you too. If you're of a quieter disposition, remember that questions are a way to participate, so you can come to class prepared to ask questions. I reserve the right to call on people.

Third, you will be responsible for leading discussion 2 or 3 times during the semester on assigned sources. You may pair up with another student if this is helpful to you.

How To Assess Your Participation

If you have answered yes to most of the following questions, you are participating in class at an appropriate pace and level:

1. Have I read the assigned reading in advance? Have I kept a journal that allows me to contribute to the conversation?

2. Do I speak in a constructive way every class period?
3. Have I asked a question or made a comment about the assigned reading(s), even if I am not responsible for leading discussion?
4. Have I engaged in conversation or debate about the readings with other students, rather than addressing all of my comments to the professor?

3. Exams (50%)

There will be four exams based on the lectures, the discussions and the readings. The first exam will account for 5% of your grade, the others for 45% of your grade.

4. Film Discussion (20%)

You will write a film study guide in a group of 2-3 students and use it to discuss a film from a list (see separate handout on films)

All work in this class must be completed to get a passing grade (you cannot “skip” notes, attendance and participation, leading discussion, or exams).

Some Important Policies

I expect courteous and respectful behavior from all students. This includes participating in class discussion and in small group work, listening carefully to your peers, considering carefully their ideas and responding honestly and graciously, and refraining from interrupting. One further element of respectful behavior relates to the issue of plagiarism.

To plagiarize is to present someone else's work—his or her words, line of thought, or organizational structure—as your own. This occurs when sources are not cited properly, or when permission is not obtained from the original author to use his or her work. Another person's "work" can take many forms: drawings, paintings, oral presentations, papers, essays, articles or chapters, statistical data, tables or figures, etc. In short, if any information that can be considered the intellectual property of another is used without acknowledging the original source properly, this is plagiarism. Please familiarize yourself with the entire Westmont College Plagiarism Policy. This document defines different levels of plagiarism and the penalties for each. It also contains very helpful information on strategies for avoiding plagiarism. It cannot be overemphasized that plagiarism is an insidious and disruptive form of academic dishonesty. It violates relationships with your classmates and professors, and it violates the legal rights of people you may never meet.

How about AI? AI can be useful for some tasks, for instance to explain a term that you are not familiar with as you are reading a source. However, it is helpful to remember that:

- AI can hallucinate – and create facts or sources that do not exist.
- Because AI draws its information from all kinds of sources, it can use unreliable sources - in the case of studies on the Holocaust, AI may draw from sources that deny the very existence of the Holocaust.
- Unless you have the appropriate expertise in the field, you most likely won't be able to tell whether AI is hallucinating or relying on poor sources. But I will.

Most importantly, remember that studying, as it asks us to pay attention, can be part of our spiritual formation. AI is counter-productive:

- when you need to “learn and synthesize new ideas or information. Asking for a summary is not the same as reading for yourself. Asking AI to solve a problem for you is not an effective way to learn, even if it feels like it should be. To learn something new, you are going to have to do the reading and thinking yourself.”
- “When the effort is the point. In many areas, people need to struggle with a topic to succeed - writers rewrite the same page, academics revisit a theory many times. By shortcutting that struggle, no matter how frustrating, you may lose the ability to reach the vital “aha” moment.” (Ethan Mollick, <https://substack.com/home/post/p-152600543>)

Language is not simply a commodity to be produced and consumed (generated by a machine to get something done), but a God -given resource to be cherished and stewarded.

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments
Holocaust Survey			
Jan 7 Week 1	Introduction		
Jan 9	Jews and Antisemitism	Engel, chapters 1-3 Reader: <i>Holocaust and Nature</i> , Preface (secondary 1) & Poisonous Mushroom (primary 1)	Journal
Jan 14 Week 2	Twisted Roads	Engel, chapters 4-5 Reader : Hillesum (primary 3)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Jan 16	From Racism to Genocide	Engel, chapters 6-7 Reader : <i>Mauss</i> (primary 4)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)

The Roots of the Holocaust			
Jan 23 Week 3	Science: Eugenics	Bergen, 1-3 and 11-16 (secondary 2) Himmler's Speech (primary 16a) Test 1	Journal
Jan 28 Week 4	Eugenics and Conservationists	Reader: Garland Allen (secondary 3) Reader: Poster (primary 7)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Jan 30	Eugenics and Disability	Reader: Proctor (secondary 4) T4 (primary 5) & report (primary 16b)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Feb 4 Week 5	Imperialism, Racism, and Genocide	Reader: Zimmerer (secondary 5), Bergen 16-20 (secondary 2), hereditary law (primary 6)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Feb 6	Nationalism and Racism, Animals and Landscape	Reader: Closman (secondary 6), Boria Sax (primary 8)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Feb 11 Week 6	Expansion of the Gardening State	Reader: Blackbourne, 251-278, (secondary 7) Bergen, 26-28 (secondary 2)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Feb 13	Expansion of the Gardening State	Reader: Blackbourne, 278-309 (secondary 7)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Feb 20 Week 7		Watch film: <i>Zone of Interest</i> Exam 1	
Holocaust Landscapes			
Feb 25 Week 8	Zone of Interest	Film Discussion Wolschke-Bulmahn (secondary 8)	Film Discussion 1
Feb 27	Holocaust Landscapes	Cole, 1-20, Engel 5 (review) Bellos (primary 2)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Mar 4 Week 9	Ghetto	Cole, 20-43 Perechodnik, "Aktion" TBA	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Mar 6	Ghetto	Helphand (secondary 9)	Film Discussion 2 - A film unfinished or The Pianist (selected viewers)
Spring Break			
Mar 18 Week 10	Forest The Ravine 1	<i>The Ravine</i> , chapters 1-3 Reader: Commissar order (Primary 9)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)

Mar 20	Forest The Ravine 2	Reader: Eliach (Primary 10) <i>The Ravine</i> , chapters 4-6	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Mar 25 Week 11	Forest The Ravine 3	Cole 45-67 <i>The Ravine</i> , chapters 7-8 Reader: Reports (Primary 16 b & c)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Mar 27		Exam 2	
Apr 1 Week 12	Forest	<i>Defiance</i>	Film Discussion 3 - Defiance
Apr 3	Camp	Cole 69-80 Reader: Barbed Wire (secondary 10) Levi (Primary 11)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Apr 8 Week 13	Camp	Cole 80-98 Reader: Borowski (Primary 15)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Apr 10	Waste	Reader: Berg (secondary 11) & Levy- Hass and list (Primary 14 & 16e)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Apr 15 Week 14	Attic, Cellar	Cole, 127-150	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Apr 17	Rescue	Robins, "Unproblematic Altruists"	Film Discussion 4. Weapons of the Spirit
Apr 22 Week 15	Memory and landscapes	Reader: Charlesworth (secondary 12)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
Apr 24	Memory, landscapes & Contemporary Implications	Reader: Rapson (secondary sources 13)	Journal Lead discussion (sign up)
April 30	Exam 3 12:00		

Secondary Sources

1. Pollefeyt, Didier, ed, *Holocaust and Nature*, Zürich : Lit, 2013, 8-12.
2. Bergen, Doris, "Preconditions: Antisemitism, Racism, and Common Prejudices in Early-Twentieth-Century Europe," in *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1-3, 11-28.
3. Allen, Garland E., "'Culling the Herd': Eugenics and the Conservation Movement in the United States, 1900-1940," *Journal of the History of Biology*, Spring 2013, 46:1, 31-39 & 61-72 (excerpts)

4. Proctor, Robert, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1988, 177-192, 251-155 & 268-273
5. Zimmerer, Jürgen, "The First Genocide of the Twentieth Century: The German War of Destruction in South-West Africa (1904-1908) and the Global History of Genocide," in Doris L. Bergen (ed.), *Lessons and Legacies Volume VIII: From Generation to Generation*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008, 34-64.
6. Cloonan, Charles E., "Legalizing a Volksgemeinschaft: Nazi Germany's Reich's Nature Protection Law of 1935", in Brüggemeier, Franz-Josef, Mark Cioc, and Thomas Zeller, *How Green were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich*, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005, 18-42.
7. Blackbourn, David. *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany*, New York: Norton, 2006, 251-258, 266-67, 273-79, 288-309.
8. Wolschke-Bulmahn, Joachim and Gert Gröning, "The National Socialist Garden and Landscape Ideal: Bodenständigkeit (Rootedness in the Soil)" in Richard A. Eftin, ed, *Art, Culture, and Media Under the Third Reich*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002, 73-97.
9. Helphand, Kenneth, *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime*, San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006, 60-65, 92-105
10. Netz, Reviel, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004, 194-95, 209-213, 227.
11. Berg, Anne, *Empire of Rags and Bones: Waste and War in Nazi Germany*, Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2024, 8-15, 162-169, 175-183.
12. Charlesworth, Andrew and Michael Addis, "Memorialization and the Ecological Landscapes of Holocaust Sites: The cases of Plaszow and Auschwitz-Birkenau", *Landscape Research* Vol. 27, No. 3 (July 2002): 229-251.
13. Rapson, Jessica, *Topographies of Suffering: Buchenwald, Babi Yar, Lidice*. New and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015, 25-39.
14. Robins, Marianne, "Unproblematic Altruists..."

Primary Sources

1. Source 1. *The Poisonous Mushroom*.
2. Hillesum, Etty, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943*. New York: Holt Paperbacks 1996, 184-185, 378-81, 314-315.
3. Bellos, David (trans.), *The Journal of Helene Berr*, New York: Weinstein Books, 2008, 22, 67-71, 155-159, 164-167, 228-231, 236-239, 256-264.

4. Spiegelman, Art, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. II. And Here my Troubles Began*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1992, 84-95.
5. Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism, v. 3: Foreign Policy, War, and Racial Extermination: A Documentary Reader*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001, 404-405
6. German History in Documents and Images -Law of the Prevention of Offsprings with Hereditary Diseases (July 4, 1933). <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/law-for-the-prevention-of-offspring-with-hereditary-diseases-july-14-1933>
7. Eugenics: German Poster: "The Eradication of the Sick and Weak in Nature"
8. Sax, Boria. "Law on Animal Protection" and "Brief Chronology of Legislation on Animals and Nature in the Third Reich", in *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust*, New York: Continuum, 2000, 179-183, 184-186
9. Directives for the Treatment of Political Commissars ("Commissar Order") (June 6, 1941), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-1548>> [November 20, 2024].
10. Eliach, Yaffa, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, New York: Vintage Books, 1982, 3-4, 53-55.
11. Levi, Primo, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986, 131-135, 71-76.
12. Levy-Hass, Hanna, *Diary of Bergen-Belsen*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009, 38-41, 100-105
13. Borowski, Tadeusz, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, New York: Penguin Books, 1959, 143-146.
14. Hochstadt, ed., *Sources of the Holocaust*, New York: Palgrave, 2004
 - a) "Speech of Heinrich Himmler to SS Leaders on Homosexuality, 18 February 1937", 49-51
 - b) "Report of Meeting of Germans Mayors Concerning Murder of the Handicapped", 3 April 1940", 103-105
 - c) "Report of Einsatzgruppen Murders in Soviet Union, 2 October, 1941", 110-111
 - d) "Report on Police Battalion Murder of Jews in Bielorussia, 30 October 1941", 124-128
 - e) "Mauthausen Death List, 19 March 1945", 214-15