



INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students will examine primary sources reflecting multiple perspectives on the experience of Jews at the Auschwitz concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. Students will evaluate these sources in order to understand how various types of historical documentation work together to form a more complete picture of a historical event. They will also assess the strengths and weaknesses of each type of source, paying special attention to the source's reliability, the kind of information it can and cannot provide, and how the source's intended audience affects its content.

GRADE LEVEL

7–12

TIME REQUIREMENT

1–2 class periods

OBJECTIVE

Students will evaluate multiple types of sources to assess their reliability, their strengths and weaknesses, and the kinds of information they can or cannot provide. They will also use a combination of sources to draw evidence-based conclusions about the experience of Jews at Auschwitz.

MATERIALS

- Copies of the **Auschwitz Primary Sources** available in this guide or on ww2classroom.org
- Copies of the **Student Worksheet**

ONLINE RESOURCES

ww2classroom.org

- ▶ **Charlotte Weiss Oral History**
- ▶ **End of the War Video**

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9](#)

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9](#)

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

[HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 3B](#)

The student is able to analyze Hitler's "final solution" and the Allied responses to the Holocaust and war crimes.

[HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 2](#)

The student comprehends a variety of historical sources.

[HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 4](#)

The student is able to obtain historical data from a variety of sources, including library and museum collections, historic sites, historical photos, journals, diaries, eyewitness accounts, newspapers, and the like; documentary films, oral testimony from living witnesses, censuses, tax records, city directories, statistical compilations, and economic indicators.

The student is able to support interpretations with historical evidence in order to construct closely reasoned arguments rather than facile opinions.

PROCEDURES

1. Introduce students to Auschwitz and the concept of concentration camps using the **Holocaust Overview Essay**. Ask students to reflect briefly on the kinds of information the essay provides about Auschwitz, noting also what details the essay does not include. Ask students to suggest kinds of primary sources that might be available to fill in these gaps. This can take the form either of a discussion or a brief written reflection. After exploring students' answers, explain that they will now have the opportunity to learn more about the experiences of prisoners at Auschwitz by analyzing multiple kinds of primary sources related to the camp.
2. You may choose to either conduct this lesson as a whole class, with each student reading all of the sources individually, or divide students into groups and have each member focus on one source before discussing it with the group. In either case, distribute copies of the **Auschwitz Primary Sources** to students, along with copies of the **Student Worksheet**. If each student is reading all of the sources, they will need two copies of the sheet.

3. Share the **Biography of Charlotte Weiss** (page 17) with students, then play the **Charlotte Weiss Oral History** for the entire class. All students should complete a **Student Worksheet** for this source. Alternatively, if you are conducting this lesson as a group exercise, you can assign the **Charlotte Weiss Oral History** as one of the sources for a member of each group to analyze.
4. If you are conducting the lesson as a whole class, have students read each primary source, completing a **Student Worksheet** for each one. If the class is working in groups, have each student in the group read their assigned source and complete a **Student Worksheet** for that source only.
5. Once students have finished analyzing their primary sources, have them write reflectively and/or discuss (in groups or the whole class) answers to the following questions:
 - Based on your analysis of the evidence in these sources, what conclusions can you draw about the experience of the prisoners at Auschwitz?
 - What are the similarities between these sources, and what are the differences?
 - Which primary sources provided you with the most valuable information about Auschwitz? Why did you find some sources more or less valuable than others?
 - Name at least one case where you were able to use information from multiple sources to draw a conclusion about the prisoner experience at Auschwitz.
 - After reading these sources, what additional questions do you have about Auschwitz? What kinds of primary sources might give you that information?
6. To close out the final discussion, explain that even today, some individuals and organizations still claim that the Holocaust never happened and that the evidence for its existence has been fabricated. Ask students to reflect (orally or in writing) on how using the various perspectives in these primary sources can help address this issue.

ASSESSMENT

You will be able to assess students' ability to evaluate primary sources and draw conclusions based on analysis through the notes they take on each source, their written reflections, and their group/class discussion

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

- Have students closely analyze the excerpts of the Rudolf Höss memoirs and the Vrba-Wetzler report and use context clues to hypothesize the meaning of unfamiliar terms such as *Hlinka*, *Aktionen*, and *Sturmbannführer*. Depending on the reading levels and experiences of your students, you may find other words throughout the sources to use for this exercise.
- Have students write their own diary entry, letter, or memoir from the perspective of a prisoner at Auschwitz, drawing on the details in the primary sources used in this activity to ensure historical accuracy.

EXCERPT FROM THE DIARY OF HELGA WEISS REGARDING LIFE AT AUSCHWITZ

Helga Weiss was 12 years old when Nazi soldiers removed her family from their home in Prague to a ghetto at Terezín. From there, she was taken to Auschwitz where she remained only briefly before being sent off to another camp. Her diary contains numerous details about her experiences as an Auschwitz prisoner.

Early in the morning came the wake-up call, after which each bunk received a pot with scrapings in it. They said that we're new here so there was no more left for us. I was utterly miserable. If that's how they're going to feed us, then it's the end for us. Although it wasn't at all edible—cold, thick, and bitter—we forced it down. Partially to fill our stomachs with something, anything, and also because we were afraid that they would punish us for leaving food.

After breakfast was roll-call, where they counted us, left us standing there for an hour, maybe two, I don't know exactly, because I don't have a watch—in any case it was endless. Why I don't know; apparently it's part of the daily program. They only let us back in the building once it seemed to them that we were sufficiently tired and frozen through and through. It's only October, but it was freezing cold standing there at four in the morning (it must have been around then, it was still completely dark), almost naked, for the rags they dressed us in can't be called clothes, our bare feet stuck in Dutch clogs (sometimes only one clog, if you're not clever and energetic enough to clamber down from the bunk in time and there aren't enough to go round)—and the worst thing of all, with a shaven head; that's the part that gets coldest.

Besides that, this Polish climate is awfully odd. During the day the sun beats down till people faint from the heat, while in the early morning it freezes worse than at home in December. I have to laugh when I remember how Mom always got mad when I wouldn't want to put on a cap or long stockings in winter. If I ever get home again, I will never wear anything on my head till the day I die.

Source: Helga Weiss, Helga's Diary: A Young Girl's Account of Life in a Concentration Camp (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

EXCERPT FROM THE REPORT OF AUSCHWITZ ESCAPEES RUDOLF VRBA AND ALFRÉD WETZLER

Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler were Czechoslovakian Jews sent to Auschwitz as prisoners in 1942. They escaped from the camp in April 1944 and made their way back to Czechoslovakia where they submitted a report of their experiences to the Slovakian Jewish Council. The report was translated and sent to Czech government representatives in neutral Switzerland where it was then translated again and distributed to the Allied governments, including the United States.

On the 13th April 1942 our group, consisting of 1,000 men, was loaded into railroad cars at the assembly camp of SERED. The doors were shut so that nothing would reveal the direction of the journey and when they were open after a long while we realized that we had crossed the Slovak frontier and were in ZWARDON. The train had until then been guarded by Hlinka men but was now taken over by SS guards. After a few of the cars had been uncoupled from our convoy we continued on our way arriving at night at AUSCHWITZ, where we stopped on a side-track. The reason the other cars were left behind was apparently the lack of room at AUSCHWITZ. They joined us, however, a few days later. Upon arrival we were placed in rows of five and counted. There were 643 of us. After a walk of about 20 minutes with our heavy packs (we had left Slovakia well equipped) we reached the concentration camp of AUSCHWITZ.

We were at once led into a huge barrack where on the one side we had to deposit all our luggage and on the other side completely undress, leaving our clothes and valuables behind. Naked, we then proceeded to an adjoining barrack where our heads and bodies were shaved and disinfected [sic] with lysol. At the exit every man was given a number which began with 28,600 in consecutive order. With this number in hand we were then herded to a third barrack where so-called registration took place. This consisted of tattooing the numbers we had received in the second barrack on the left side of our chest. The extreme brutality with which this was effected made many of us faint. The particulars of our identity were also recorded. Then we were led in groups of a hundred into a cellar, and later to a barrack where we were issued striped prisoners clothes and wooden clogs. This lasted until 10 a.m. In the afternoon our prisoner's outfit was taken away from us again and replaced by the ragged and dirty remains of Russian uniforms. Thus equipped we were marched off to BIRKENAU.

AUSCHWITZ is a concentration camp for political prisoners under so-called "protective custody". At the time of my arrival, that is in April of 1942, there were about 15,000 prisoners in the camp, the majority of whom were Poles, Germans and civilian Russians under protective custody. A small number of prisoners came under the categories of criminals and "work-shirkers".

AUSCHWITZ camp headquarters controls at the same time the work-camp of BIRKENAU as well as the farm labor camp of HARMENSE. All the prisoners arrive first at AUSCHWITZ where they are provided with a prisoner's immatriculation number and then are either kept there, sent to BIRKENAU or, in very small numbers, to HARMENSE. The prisoners receive consecutive numbers upon arrival. Every number is only used once so that the last number always corresponds to the number of prisoners actually in the camp. At the time of our escape, that is to say at the beginning of April 1944, the number had risen up to 180,000. At the outset the numbers were tattooed on the left breast, but later, due to their becoming blurred, on the left forearm.

Source: The "Auschwitz Protocols," Records of the War Refugee Board, FDR Presidential Library.

EXCERPT FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RUDOLF HÖSS

Rudolf Höss was commander of the Auschwitz concentration camp from 1940 to 1943. Under his leadership, the camp experimented with multiple methods of murdering inmates, mainly using poisonous gasses. Höss was captured, tried, and sentenced to death after the war. The following is an excerpt from his memoirs, which he wrote while in prison.

In the summer of 1941, I cannot remember the exact date, I was suddenly summoned to the Reichsführer SS, directly by his adjutant's office. Contrary to his usual custom, Himmler received me without his adjutant being present and said in effect:

"The Fuhrer has ordered that the Jewish question be solved once and for all and that we, the SS, are to implement that order. The existing extermination centers in the East are not in a position to carry out the large Aktionen which are anticipated. I have therefore earmarked Auschwitz for this purpose, both because of its good position as regards communications and because the area can easily be isolated and camouflaged. At first I thought of calling in a senior SS officer for this job, but I changed my mind in order to avoid difficulties concerning the terms of reference. I have now decided to entrust this task to you. It is difficult and onerous and calls for complete devotion notwithstanding the difficulties that may arise. You will learn further details from Sturmbannführer Eichmann of the Reich Security Main Office who will call on you in the immediate future.

"The departments concerned will be notified by me in due course. You will treat this order as absolutely secret, even from your superiors. After your talk with Eichmann you will immediately forward to me the plans for the projected installations.

"The Jews are the sworn enemies of the German people and must be eradicated. Every Jew that we can lay our hands on is to be destroyed now during the war, without exception. If we cannot now obliterate the biological basis of Jewry, the Jews will one day destroy the German people."

On receiving these grave instructions, I returned forthwith to Auschwitz, without reporting to my superior at Oranienburg.

Source: Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz: The Autobiography of Rudolf Höss (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1960).

NAME:

DATE:

PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS SHEET

Source citation:

Type of source:

Source's author/creator:

Date of creation:

Intended audience:

How do you think this source's origin and intended audience affects the information it contains?

Key details from source:

What do those details teach you about the experience of Jews at Auschwitz?

On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being "very unreliable" and 10 being "very reliable," how would you rate this document/interview's reliability as a source of historical information? Why would you give it this rating?