

Why do numbers count?

The significance of statistics on the Holocaust in the case of the Wannsee Conference

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Keywords

Wannsee Conference; Holocaust; identity; statistics; genocide

Description

A set of exercises for students aged 16-19 created within the project 'Statistics and Catastrophe. Questioning Eichmann's Numbers' based on the infographic which presents the map of Europe according to the Protocol of the Wannsee Conference ([Link to the infographic](#)).

The set is divided into two parts - Analysis and Reflection. It provides the teacher with tools to deepen the students' knowledge about the Holocaust and in particular the Wannsee Conference and its consequences. It aims to encourage and empower the students to become active participants in memory culture.

Preparation

Before the lesson, inform or remind the students about the following:

- Nazi Germany politics of repressions towards Jews starting from 1933
- The stages of the Holocaust
- The major events of the Second World War until 1942
- The Allies and Axis countries

You can use the infographic to introduce the topic into the classroom ([Link to the infographics](#))

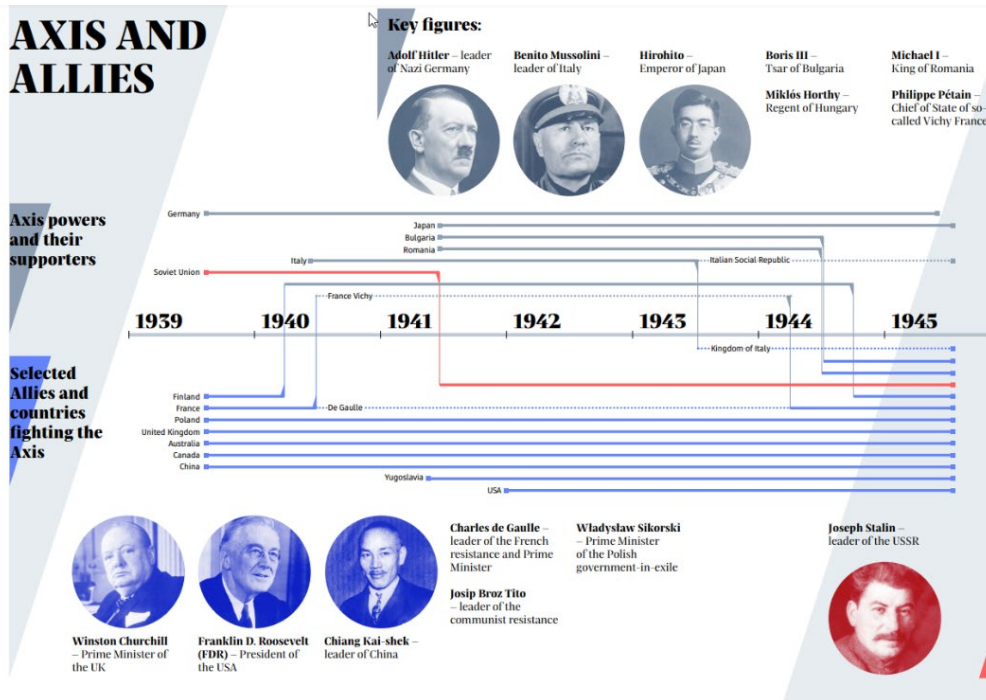


Figure 1. A page from the Infographic 'Second World War'

Objectives for the students

- You will learn what the Wannsee Conference was and how it influenced the history of the Holocaust.
- You will learn about different types of historical sources that allow you to estimate the size of the population. You will consider how people were counted in the past.
- You will consider why statistics are an important tool for gaining historical understanding, but why we also need to explore individual stories to understand different complex historical events.

Methods

Interactive infographic, map, chart, analysis of primary sources, group work, discussion

Opening activity | 'Discussion around Statements'

Post the sentences on the board, on the wall or spread them out on the floor and ask the students to read them. They are asked to get up and stand on the left side of the room (if they agree with the statement), on the right side (if they disagree), or in the centre (if they have no opinion). Lead a discussion around the statements. The students can also pick a statement that they most relate to or that they find the most interesting.

Statements:

- Numbers are not so relevant, they cannot tell the whole truth.
- It doesn't matter if 100,000 or 110,000 people died in a battle which took place a hundred years ago.
- Numbers give a better idea of the scale of the event.
- We should remember especially the events where the number of victims is very high.
- Where possible, we should try to determine very accurately the number of people
- Big numbers are abstract to me, they do not allow me to understand past events.

Inform the students that you will come back to those statements at the end of the lesson. They will be able to change their minds.

Part One: Analysis

Introduction | What is the so-called Wannsee-Conference?

1. Go to the infographic ([Link to the infographic](#)) and watch the intro animation in the language of your choice (English, German or Polish).

Answer the questions:

- Who met at the Wannsee Conference?
- What was the purpose of the Conference?

- Why did numbers play an important role at that conference?
- Write down one important number. Why is that number crucial?

L a n d	Zahl
A. Altreich	131.800
Ostmark	43.700
Ostgebiete	420.000
Generalgouvernement	2.284.000
Bialystok	400.000
Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren	74.200
Estland - judenfrei -	
Lettland	3.500
Litauen	34.000
Belgien	43.000
Dänemark	5.600
Frankreich / Besetztes Gebiet	165.000
Unbesetztes Gebiet	700.000
Griechenland	69.600
Niederlande	160.800
Norwegen	1.300
B. Bulgarien	48.000
England	330.000
Finnland	2.300
Irland	4.000
Italien einschl. Sardinien	58.000
Albanien	200
Kroatien	40.000
Portugal	3.000
Rumänien einschl. Bessarabien	342.000
Schweden	8.000
Schweiz	18.000
Serbien	10.000
Slowakei	88.000
Spanien	6.000
Türkei (europ. Teil)	55.500
Ungarn	742.800
UdSSR	5.000.000
Ukraine	2.994.684
Weißrußland aus- schl. Bialystok	446.484
Zusammen: über	11.000.000

Figure 2. Page 6 of The Protocol of the Wannsee Conference

Preparing the analysis | The Protocol

2. Look at a historical source – the list form page 6 of the Wannsee Conference Protocol. You can also see it by clicking on the Wannsee villa icon on the map. Formulate your first impressions. The following questions might help:
 - What parts does the list consist of?
 - Look at the countries. What could the different columns mean?
 - Where could the authors of this document have got their data on the numbers of Jews?
 - Look at the numbers. Are they precise or rounded?
 - Does the list seem complete? Compare the document with the territories on the map and check if there are any territories missing.
 - The list on page 6 is often considered by historians as a crucial part of the Wannsee Protocol. Why do you think that is?
 - Which role did statistics (numbers) play during the Conference? What was the aim of creating and presenting this document during the Conference? Why is the number of 11 million crucial to understanding the document?

Note for the teacher

The list on page six of the Wannsee Protocol has become an icon of the Holocaust.

It demonstrates the pan-European scale and the unprecedented nature of the Nazis' murderous plans. Nonetheless, the list raises many questions, contains several ambiguities and is open to interpretation.

The students might note that all the numbers are rounded and the final number of 11,000,000 is not accurate. A number of territories are missing.

Pay attention to the value of gathering precise information based on primary sources (especially the number of people - inhabitants, victims, minorities ...) that should characterise the work of a historian.

3. Read some extracts from the Wannsee Protocol that illustrate the concrete purpose and the actual intention behind the list and the meeting.

*With appropriate prior authorisation from the Führer, emigration has now been replaced by **evacuation of the Jews to the East** as another possible solution. [...] In the course of this **final solution of the Jewish question**, roughly eleven million Jews will be taken into consideration. They are distributed over the individual countries as follows: (p.5)*

[List on page 6]

The figures listed here for Jews in the different countries, however, pertain only to those who are of Jewish faith [Glaubensjuden] as definitions of Jews along racial lines are still lacking there to a certain extent. Given the prevailing attitudes and opinions, the handling of the problem in the individual countries will encounter certain difficulties, particularly in Hungary and Romania. For instance, even today the Jew in Romania can still obtain for cash the appropriate documents that certify officially that he is of foreign nationality... (p. 7)

*In the course of the final solution, and under appropriate supervision, the Jews are to be utilised for work in the East in a suitable manner. In large labour columns, separated by sex, the Jews capable of working will be dispatched to these regions to build roads. In the process, a large portion will undoubtedly **drop out through natural reduction**. (p. 7)*

*Those who ultimately should possibly get by will have to be given **suitable treatment** because they unquestionable represent the most resistant part and therefore constitute a **natural selection** that, if released, become the germ cell of renewed Jewish revival. (Witness the experience of history.) **In the course of the practical implementation of the final solution, Europe will be combed through from West to East.** (p. 8)*

For the implementation of the final solution, the Nuremberg Laws should form the basis to a certain extent, though the solution to issues pertaining to mixed marriages and Mischlinge is also a prerequisite for clearing up the problem completely. (p. 10)

Consider | What was intended for people defined as ‘Jewish’?

Explain the actual meaning of the underlined phrases. Reflect on how the Nazis made use of language.

- Why the authors of the document didn't use frank, direct words?
 - What do you think happens to people using or reading this vocabulary instead of frank words?
4. In this exercise the students will consider what is the meaning behind the two different columns included in the Wannsee Conference Protocol.

Come back to the infographic and divide the class into 3 groups:

- group one will read about territories from the A category (blue on the map) - Territories occupied or under the influence of the German Reich
- group two – B category (violet on the map) - unoccupied or neutral territories
- group three – territories not included in the Protocol (grey on the map).

Let each group choose two or three territories from their category and ask the students to read their descriptions. Ask the following question: Why were the selected territories assigned to the A or B category, or: Why were they omitted?

Additional exercise

Ask the students to click on the following territories: Ostgebiete - former eastern territories of Germany, Altreich - Old Reich, Frankreich (Besetztes Gebiet) - France (Occupied Territory), Frankreich (Unbesetztes Gebiet) - France (Unoccupied Territory), Ukraine, Estland- Estonia. They will be able to find different types of primary sources used to count the Jewish population –a newspaper article, a state document, a scientific publication, etc. Ask again the question: Where could the authors of the Wannsee Conference Protocol have got their data on the numbers of Jews?

Contextualization | The ten stages of genocide

- The theory of the **ten stages of genocide** has been introduced by Gregory Stanton, the founding president of Genocide Watch (a non-governmental organization campaigning against genocide). Hand out **Worksheet 1** and ask the students to work in groups in order to put the ten stages in the right order. Is the chronology always clear or are there overlapping stages? A chart to display by the teacher once the students have completed the exercise:

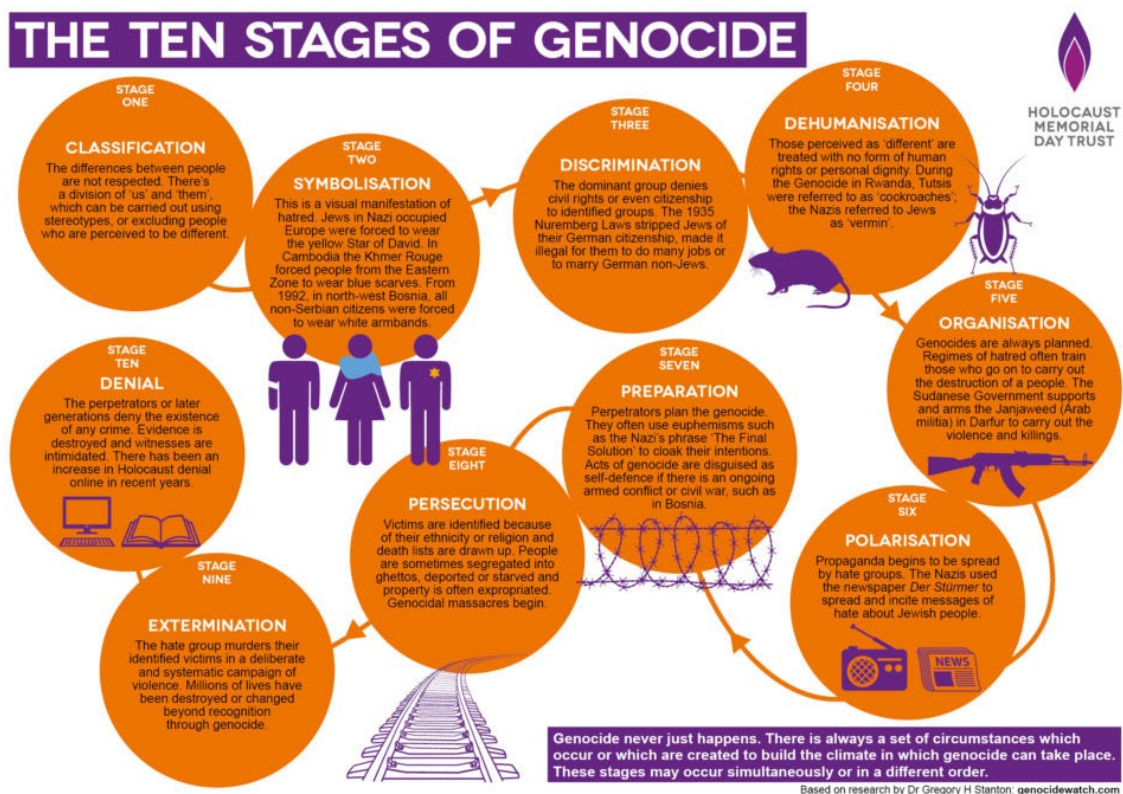


Figure 3. The ten stages of genocide – a chart

Source: Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, a poster of the infographics can be downloaded ([Link to the poster](#))

6. The definition of what constitutes being Jewish was expanded for the 1939 census. Residents now had to report how many of their grandparents were Jewish, as defined by the Nuremberg Laws. See the document below.

4/6 Deutsches Reich

Übersicht 1a. Die Juden und jüdischen Mischlinge im Deutschen Reich

Reich, Reichsteile	Abstammung	Juden oder jüdische Mischlinge insgesamt		davon									
				Glaubensjuden			Angehörige evangelischer Landes- und Freikirchen			Römisch-katholische Christen			
		Summe	männl.	weibl.	Summe	männl.	weibl.	Summe	männl.	weibl.	Summe	männl.	weibl.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
Deutsches Reich ¹⁾	Juden	530 539	138 819	191 720	297 407	125 707	171 700	13 126	5 060	8 066	10 403	3 888	6 515
	Jüdische Mischlinge 1. Grades	71 126	32 839	38 287	6 660	3 182	3 478	34 745	15 704	19 041	21 408	9 703	11 705
	Jüdische Mischlinge 2. Grades	41 456	19 935	21 521	490	244	246	24 796	11 713	13 083	12 987	6 272	6 715

Figure 4. Report on the population of the German Reich according to the results of the 1939 census.

Source: [Statistisches Reichsamts, Statistik des Deutschen Reichs \(Reich Statistical Office, Statistics of the German Reich\), Vol 552.4, Berlin 1944.](https://www.vadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206504.pdf)

Comment

In the above statistics you can see that the citizens were divided into:

- *Juden* (Jews)
- *Jüdische Mischlinge 1. Grades* (A Mischling of the first degree, or half-Jew, was a person with two Jewish grandparents who did not belong to the Jewish religion or who was not married to a Jew as of September 15, 1935.)
- *Jüdische Mischlinge 2. Grades* (A Mischling of the second degree, or quarter-Jew, was someone with one Jewish grandparent or an Aryan married to a Jew.)

Mischling ("hybrid"; plural: *Mischlinge*) was a pejorative, racist legal term which was used in Nazi Germany to describe persons of mixed "Aryan" and non-Aryan, ancestry¹.

¹ Read more on: https://www.vadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206504.pdf

Consider | Why the definition was expanded? Note that participants in this census could not make their own decisions about their identity. How they were classified affected their chances of survival during the Holocaust. Recall the infographics about the ten stages of genocide.

Write down to which of the stages the 1939 census might be assigned.

Note for the teacher

Thanks to this exercise the students learn how the classification became a path to genocide. You can pay attention to the risk of the top-down assigning of identification (e.g. national, religious) to individuals as a tool of discrimination and social classification.

You might also ask the students to reflect on the difference between origins (Where am I from? Where were my grandparents born? What is my nationality?) and identity (Who am I? Who do I think I am?) How do they feel when their identity is defined externally?

7. Come back to the infographic. Choose one biography and note how the person's life was affected by being defined externally. What do you learn about how the person reacted to the persecution? How did they deal with - or maybe even defy - the situation? Prepare a quick presentation.

Part Two: Reflection

1. **Discussion** around the statements

Come back to the statements from the first introductory exercise. Ask the students where they want to change something or comment.

This would allow you to see if the students have changed their standpoint after dealing in depth with the numbers of page 6. This is also an opportunity to reflect upon one's own learning progression / path.

- Numbers are not so relevant, they cannot tell the whole truth.
- It doesn't matter if 100,000 or 110,000 people died in a battle which took place a hundred years ago.
- Numbers give a better idea of the scale of the event.
- We should remember especially the events where the number of victims is very high.
- Where possible, we should try to very accurately determine the number of people (participants of events from the past), and this is a task for historians.
- Big numbers are abstract to me, they do not allow me to understand past events.

Note for the teacher

You can ask your students to think about the statements from a different point of view. Ask them to imagine that they are historians, teachers, students, memorial site visitors, descendants of survivors, or politicians. Did their attitude towards the statistics have changed?

2. **Interpretation** of the poem

Read a poem by Wisława Szymborska.-Discuss the meaning of the sentence 'A thousand and one is still only a thousand'. Do you agree with the message?

Starvation Camp Near Jaslo

Write it down. Write it. With ordinary ink
on ordinary paper; they weren't given food,
they all died of hunger. All. How many?
It's a large meadow. How much grass
per head? Write down: I don't know.
History rounds off skeletons to zero.
A thousand and one is still only a thousand.
That one seems never to have existed:
a fictitious fetus, an empty cradle,
a primer opened for no one,
air that laughs, cries, and grows,
stairs for a void bounding out to the garden,
no one's spot in the ranks.
(...)

Translated by: Joanna Trzeciak

Maria Wisława Anna Szymborska (1923–2012) was a Polish poet, essayist, translator, and recipient of the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Consider | How do we remember millions? What ways of commemorating and remembering the individual losses are there? Which ones make us understand the individual dimension behind 'faceless' numbers?

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Worksheet 1

Classification – The differences between people are not respected. There's a division of 'us' and 'them' which can be carried out using stereotypes, or excluding people who are perceived to be different.

Symbolisation – This is a visual manifestation of hatred. Jews in Nazi Europe were forced to wear yellow stars to show that they were 'different'.

Discrimination – The dominant group denies civil rights or even citizenship to identified groups. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of their German citizenship, made it illegal for them to do many jobs or to marry German non-Jews.

Dehumanisation – Those perceived as 'different' are treated with no form of human rights or personal dignity. During the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, Tutsis were referred to as 'cockroaches'; the Nazis referred to Jews as 'vermin'.

Organisation – Genocides are always planned. Regimes of hatred often train those who go on to carry out the destruction of a people.

Polarisation – Propaganda begins to be spread by hate groups. The Nazis used the newspaper Der Stürmer to spread and incite messages of hate about Jewish people.

Preparation – Perpetrators plan the genocide. They often use euphemisms such as the Nazis' phrase 'The Final Solution' to cloak their intentions. They create fear of the victim group, building up armies and weapons.

Persecution – Victims are identified because of their ethnicity or religion and death lists are drawn up. People are sometimes segregated into ghettos, deported or starved and property is often expropriated. Genocidal massacres begin.

Extermination – The hate group murders their identified victims in a deliberate and systematic campaign of violence. Millions of lives have been destroyed or changed beyond recognition through genocide.

Denial – The perpetrators or later generations deny the existence of any crime.